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PLAYBOY

The Kinky World of Knife Play

We've all heard of "death by a thousand cuts," but what about orgasm by thousand cuts?

BY SOPHIE SAINT THOMAS

Could sex be the enemy of death? If we're talking in a cis heteronormative context, this theory could apply to literal reproduction. In a pleasure-oriented context, sex makes us feel alive and allows us to become our most primal selves, defying death through the merging of bodies and orgasmic high. But what happens when the great kinksters of the world add the threat of death to sex? It's time to up the ante. We're talking about going all the way, which, for some people, is knife sex. Or, as the beautifully perverse minds who enjoy such erotic stimulation call it, knife play.

"I was first introduced to hematolagnia [blood fetish] when I was around 18," says U.K.-based sex educator and pro domme Lady Ness. "It started off in the form of vampire fetishism, where I explored neck and thigh biting that drew blood."

"It quickly became clear that I preferred giving rather than receiving," Ness says. "The vampiric element hasn't stuck around eternally, but exploring blood and knife play has. It feels edgy and sets me into a mindset that combines extreme lust and deep concentration, due to having to be aware of safety and your play partner's reactions."

Making it to home base doesn't mean penis in the vagina; that's as straight and vanilla as a diner milkshake. For knife play practitioners, it means breaking out the knives. But while Ness may enjoy drawing blood, piercing the skin is not the sole goal of the kink.

"Knife play tends to be more fear-based, so it's more of a psychological type of arousal," says psychotherapist and sex therapist Dulcinea Pitagora. "It's about power dynamics because the knife top is literally wielding power over the knife bottom." (Dibs on Knife Top as a band name.)

Think of engaging in knife play like having an edible: You want to start low and go slow. First, try integrating blades into your dirty talk. The submissive may whisper, "Daddy, hold a knife against my throat while you fuck me." If you want to take it further, obtain a very dull blade, which the dominant partner can hold or "threaten" the submissive with during sex. The visual of pointing a blade at someone or looking up to see the point of a knife coming down at you is so exhilarating that no bloodletting is necessary.

Knife play is an example of edge play, which does not refer to the edge of a blade but is an umbrella term for kinky activity that pushes the envelope of what is considered safe, sane and consensual. S.S.C. is an acronym used by the kink community, but one person's edge play is another person's casual Tuesday night.

"What's edgy for one person might not be edgy for another person," Pitagora says. "It's the riskier behaviors—anything that involves potential bodily fluids or breaking skin—that pushes someone's edge. You may think of edge play as deliberately pushing someone's boundaries, but what that is depends on the person. Everybody's boundaries are different."

For some, the visual of a knife may be more than enough. Often kink or sex clubs, such as New York City's NSFW, will incorporate knife play into performances for members to watch. A dominatrix dressed as a nun may run a knife down her submissive's body or use it to carefully scrape off candle wax. "It can be done in a fun way where it doesn't have to be about cutting, it doesn't have to be about bloodletting—it can be about intimidation," says NSFW founder and chief conspirator Daniel Saynt. For such moments, the audience is always on their toes, holding their breath and boners while a glistening knife glides gently over a breast.

But let's set the record straight: Sometimes knife play is gentle and performative; other times it is exactly what you imagine.

"I used a razor blade to cut his back and chest while we fucked, and let his blood run onto me," says Carrie*, a 50-year-old woman from Texas, about knife sex with her ex. "I'd lick it off him and paint us with it. As it dried, we'd stick together. Over the days afterward, I'd see the cuts healing. Once he was healed enough, we'd do it again. He kept it to areas that would be covered by a shirt."

At the risk of stating the obvious, cutting someone is not exactly the pillar of safe sex. But before you judge the edgy kinksters of the underworld, consider that you may have engaged in blood play without even knowing it.

"Let's say they're having mainstream sex and somebody is digging their fingernails or scratching someone's back," Pitagora says. "Somebody might bleed. I've heard people think it's cute or funny, but it's kind of a similar thing. Except for knife play, I would say people tend to talk more."

The world of BDSM, like so many subcultures, has learned to take care of itself. Kinksters know the stakes are higher, which means constant communication, setting boundaries, establishing safe words, rehearsing scenes and even learning medical skills.

"If your intention is to draw blood, then you should do it in a location that's safe," Pitagora says. "You should not do it near a major artery or where there are veins you could cut."

And don't forget to leave out cookies. "Other essentials are gloves and sterile medical equipment—and cookies and ice cream," says Lady Ness. "Because these acts can trigger the sympathetic nervous system, blood-sugar levels can drop, so having something sugary on hand is important. I also have an emergency foil blanket, as some subs' temperatures can drop."

"IT CAN BE DONE IN A FUN WAY WHERE IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ABOUT CUTTING, IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ABOUT BLOODLETTING—IT CAN BE ABOUT INTIMIDATION."

Knife play isn't casual, even if it's not as scary as you may think. The intensity doesn't have to be written in blood but can be expressed through a human bond. You should only engage in edge play with someone you know and trust, not for monogamy reasons but because you want to communicate and prepare without fear. It's not cool to slit and split; knife play requires aftercare, a kinky term for taking care of one another after a scene.

"Aftercare is whatever brings the power exchange from the scene back to equilibrium," Pitagora says. "For some people, it's having vanilla sex. It's the palate cleanser that takes you to a better place. There's a release of tension because once you do a risky scene with someone and it goes well then it can bring people together to feel emotionally bonded."

Adding knives, which are typically associated with violence, into sex, a beautiful and messy act of violence, can not only make you feel alive but closer with your partner than ever before. "I think part of the appeal is the power aspect—that I had the power to potentially really hurt him," Carrie says of knife sex with her ex.

With edge play, you don't need to leave a scar, even when knives are involved, to stay alive in a former lover's mind.

"Blood has always fascinated me. The smell, the taste, the way it dries and changes color and texture. Having someone share theirs with me was very intimate," Carrie says. "I've never felt a bond like that before. It was so powerful. I won't say 'magical' because that's corny, but it was very special."

*Last name withheld for privacy purposes

ADDING KNIVES, WHICH ARE TYPI-CALLY ASSOCIATED WITH VIOLENCE, INTO SEX, A BEAUTIFUL AND MESSY ACT OF VIOLENCE, CAN NOT ONLY MAKE YOU FEEL ALIVE BUT CLOSER WITH YOUR PARTNER THAN EVER BEFORE.

Blueberry Blues

A PASTORAL ADVENTURE OF LAPINOT AND RICHARD

WAHOOOO!!! ALL THESE BLUEBERRIES.
WE CAN'T EAT ALL THIS.
I'LL MAKE A SACK WITH MY T-SHIRT TO CARRY THE EXTRA.
THE GENERAL IDEA IN LIFE IS TO LEAVE SOME FOR OTHERS.
WELL, IF NO ONE ELSE COMES HERE, THE BERRIES WILL GO TO WASTE, SO WE MAY AS WELL STUFF OURSELVES AND BRING THE REST HOME.
BIRDS WILL EAT SOME...
NO, NO... I'M NOT LEAVING ANYTHING FOR THE DINOSAUR DESCENDENTS.
HUMANS INVENTED FOOSBALL IN UNDER 2 MILLIONS YEARS, BUT DINOSAURS, WITH 165 MILLION YEARS TO EVOLVE, HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING.
WHAT DID THEY DO ALL THAT TIME?
THEY TRANSFORMED INTO PIGEONS!
STOP! THERE ARE ALSO PEACOCKS, MACAWS, EAGLES, SEAGULLS...
PIGEONS AND CHICKENS!
THIS IS WHAT THEY'VE BECOME.
ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT... YOU CLEARLY DON'T LIKE BIRDS...
CAN'T WE JUST ENJOY THE MOMENT?
BUT I'M NOT DONE!

WHENEVER BIRDS SING, EVERYONE GUSHES, "OH HOW BEAUTIFUL! OH HOW MELODIOUS!!!"
BUT THE BIRDS ARE ACTUALLY JUST HUFFING AND PUFFING WHILE SCREAMING, "I WANT TO FUCK" AND "GET OFF MY BRANCH"
AND ALL THE PSEUDO-ROMANTICS SWOON OVER IT.
THE DAY SOMEONE INVENTS AN INTERSPECIES AUTOMATIC TRANSLATOR, ROMANTIC STROLLS WILL TAKE ON A WHOLE NEW TONE.
THE DAY THAT TRANSLATOR EXISTS, MAYBE YOU'LL STOP EATING MEAT.
IT'S NORMAL TO EAT MEAT! IF COWS HAD BEEN THE ONES TO EVOLVE, THEY'D BE EATING US. SO NO PITY!
COWS ARE HERBIVORES, DUMMY!
WELL, THEY SHOULD'VE TRIED STRIKING SOME FLINT ROCKS TOGETHER INSTEAD OF SHITTING WHERE THEY EAT.
WHATEVER!
I THINK YOU'RE WINDING YOURSELF UP.
AH!
A WEE COUSIN OF THE VELOCIRAPTOR!
SHOOOO!
HEY! ARE YOU THIS TENSE BECAUSE YOU RAN OUT OF DATA AND IT'S BEEN TWO DAYS SINCE YOU'VE BEEN ABLE TO TROLL PEOPLE ON TWITTER AND FACEBOOK?
WHOOOOA, DAMN! YOU'RE RIGHT. IT'S CRAZY TO BE ADDICTED AND GO THROUGH WITHDRAWAL LIKE THIS... I NEED TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.
VERY GOOD! YOU CAN COUNT ON ME TO HELP AS MUCH AS I CAN.
BY HELPING YOU, I DIDN'T MEAN SHARING A PERSONAL WI-FI SPOT SO YOU COULD BLOW OFF STEAM ON SOCIAL MEDIA.
HA HA HA! I'M ON AN ORNITHOLOGICAL FORUM AND I JUST WROTE THAT SOME BIRDS LIKE TO WEAR PAJAMAS - NOW THE RIDICULOUS INTERNET VIGILANTES ARE RILED UP AND INSULTING ME!
end

BOLD & BEAUTY

Barby Morer

Model **@barby mc**

Photography by **Juanan | @juanan_jagphoto**

Congratulations on your Playboy feature! How do you feel? I felt very proud and happy to be featured in this spectacular magazine, number 1 in the world

What is your best physical feature? My slender body from the gym and my always-smiling face.

What's one thing people would be surprised to learn about you? My addiction to chocolate hahaha

Outside of modeling, what are some of your passions or projects you're currently working on? I am very focused on my dance classes

Who inspires you the most, either in modeling or in life in general? Angelina Jolie

What message do you hope to send to women who see your feature? That they take care of their diet and that they are always very feminine

How do you define confidence and sensuality in your own terms? I think that everything you transmit is what you attract, and they see you that way

What has been the biggest lesson you've learned since entering the modeling industry? Undoubtedly, never let your guard down and always have an impeccable appearance

Do you like taking vacations? Where is your favorite place you have been, and where would you like to visit next? I love vacation time to recharge and disconnect. And of course, always in Miami

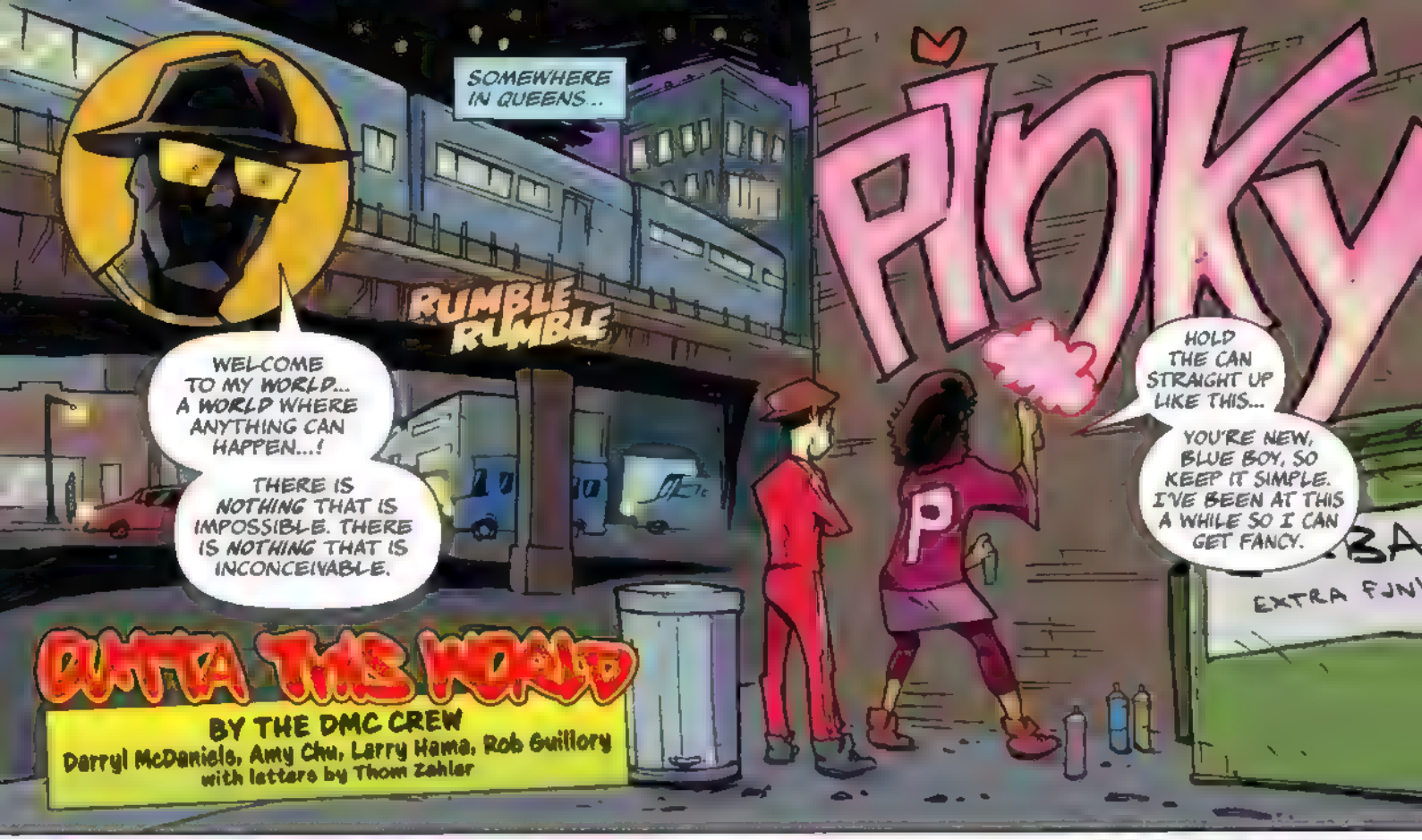
Besides modeling, what keeps you busy? Dance classes and kickboxing

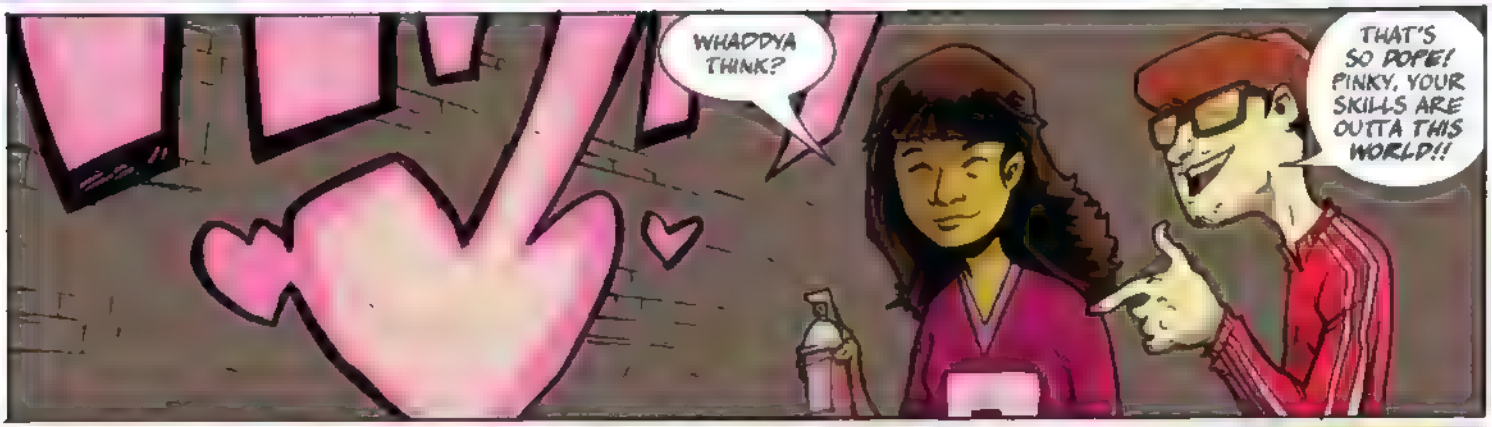
If you were stranded on a deserted island with only one accessory, what would it be? A mirror

What's next for you? Any goals, projects, or dreams you're excited about? I'm getting married one day in Las Vegas to someone I just met and have a very strong connection with

What advice would you give to aspiring models? May they never stop dreaming and fighting.

Thanks for taking the time to speak to us. Do you have any last words for our readers, and where can they find you? On my IG, and I'm open to being invited to dinner if you come to Barcelona


SOMEWHERE IN QUEENS..
RUMBLE RUMBLE
WELCOME TO MY WORLD... A WORLD WHERE ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN...!
THERE IS NOTHING THAT IS IMPOSSIBLE. THERE IS NOTHING THAT IS INCONCEIVABLE.
PINKY
HOLD THE CAN STRAIGHT UP LIKE THIS...
YOU'RE NEW, BLUE BOY, SO KEEP IT SIMPLE. I'VE BEEN AT THIS A WHILE SO I CAN GET FANCY.
EXTRA FUN
OUTTA THIS WORLD
BY THE DMC CREW
Darryl McDaniels, Amy Chu, Larry Hama, Rob Guillory
with letters by Thom Zahler


WHADDYA THINK?
THAT'S SO DOPE! PINKY, YOUR SKILLS ARE OUTTA THIS WORLD!!

HMM, COULD USE SOME MORE EXPRESSION HERE...
HEY, WHAT'S THAT...?!

...A SHOOTING STAR?!
THAT'S NO SHOOTING STAR... MAYBE A PLANE?

IT'S HEADED THIS WAY!

KABOOOM!
WHOA, WHAT THE--?
SHHH!
GARBAGE

PINKY
GARBAGE
EXTRA FUNKY!

BAGE

GAH!
LET'S MOVE!

AAHHHHHHH!!

HELP!!!
#GULP!
YO, YOU'RE IN THE WRONG NEIGHBOR-HOOD!
IT'S DMC!
?!
DMC
P
RAD!
MAN, THAT'S ONE UGLY MUTHER--
CAREFUL, SCRATCH!

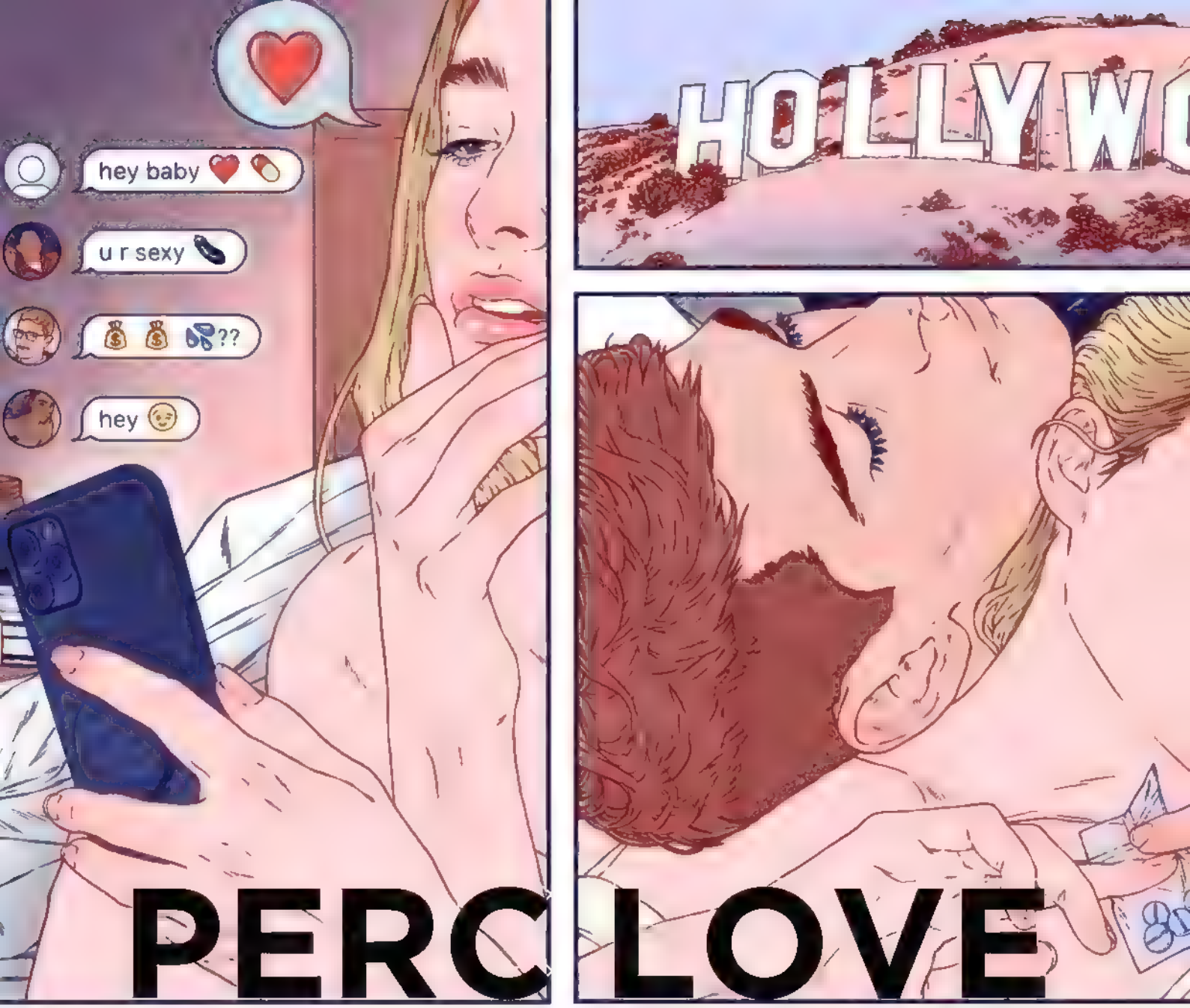
SPLUP!

LET'S SLICE AND DICE!
SLIPPERY GUY. HARD TO GET A HOLD...
SQUISH!

JASE, GET BACK! ARE YOU CRAZY?!
WHAT'S HE DOING WITH THAT BOOM BOX?!
IT'S NOT A BOOM BOX. IT'S MY NEW UNIVERSAL TRANSLATOR INVENTION.
LET'S ACTUALLY TRY TO LISTEN TO WHAT SHE HAS TO SAY...

MY NAME IS BKCKY BUT JUST CALL ME B. I COME TO YOUR WORLD IN PEACE.
I COME IN SEARCH OF THE MASTER.
I JUST WANTED TO MEET THE ONE WHO IS LEGENDARY THROUGHOUT THE GALAXY.
THE MASTER?
WHAT'S HE--I MEAN SHE-- TALKING ABOUT?
DMC
RECORDS
FOR SALE!
WHO, ME?
THE MASTER.
QUEEN OF THE UNIVERSE! YOUR WILD STYLE IS WELL KNOWN ON OUR PLANET WKWKYKY. WE WISH YOU TO TEACH US YOUR WAYS.
YOU MEAN SHE WASN'T ATTACKING THESE KIDS?
NOPE. IT'S ALL A CULTURAL MISUNDER-STANDING.
MY BAD, B.! HOW CAN WE MAKE IT UP TO YOU?

WELCOME TO MY WORLD, WHERE EXTRATERRESTRIALS BECOME EARTHLY.
IT'S A BLOCK PARTY!!
THE UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECT BECOMES SOMETHING OR SOMEONE YOU CAN IDENTIFY WITH!
NEVER TURNS INTO FOREVER!
UNREAL BECOMES FOR REAL!
LET'S TAKE THE PARTY TO YOUR PLACE, B.!!
"MY WORLD IS A WORLD OF SCIENCE, STYLE, CREATIVITY, DESIRE, BELIEF, ART, MUSIC, IMAGINATION AND MAGIC!
"IN MY WORLD IF YOU REACH FOR THE STARS, YOU CAN ACTUALLY TOUCH THEM.
"WELCOME TO MY WORLD. WELCOME TO MY UNIVERSE. WHERE EVERYONE BELONGS."
Visit the Universe of DMC at Darryl Makes Comics!
http://dmccomics.com/



BY **BEN WESTHOFF** ILLUSTRATIONS BY **SARAH MAXWELL**

5/325 TAB
TAKE 1 TAB
MOUTH EVERY
HOURS
Store Precise.

Bennett Rhodes was scrolling through Instagram early last year when he came across a young woman named Andi Galland. Twenty years old, she posed on beaches and at music festivals, she displayed an impressive command of yoga. To Bennett she epitomized the perfect bikini-clad California girl.

From his Hollywood apartment, Bennett slid into her DMs. To his delight she quickly hit him back. She liked what she saw as well. Only 18, he was a good-looking if unlikely white trap rapper with a burgeoning Instagram following. They got to chatting. Despite his hardcore raps he came from a well-to-do family in San Diego—and so did she, it turned out. She still lived there. Bennett put his cards on the table.

"I'll bet you won't come up and see me in Hollywood," he said.

"I'll bet I will," she replied.

Bennett didn't believe her until she arrived on his doorstep that same day. He was immediately charmed. She was funny, kind and down to do absolutely anything. She, likewise, was won over by his energy and charisma. He carried himself like the star he wanted to be.

Andi stayed with Bennett the entire weekend, joining him and his friends at parties and restaurants. She'd brought Xanax pills with her, and the pair indulged, helping fuel an immediate infatuation. "It became recurring; she ended up visiting us for weeks at a time," says Bennett's then-roommate, Daniel "Gibby" Gibb.

Bennett wasn't a stranger to Xanax. He sometimes rapped about it: "Them Xanies on the yellow / Bitch don't get so mellow / Your legs looking like Jell-O." But as their romance blossomed, he learned that Andi was secretly hooked on an even more dangerous drug.

Unknown to most people until a few years ago, fentanyl is 50 times stronger than heroin, an opioid that leaves users feeling like they're floating on a cloud. Incredibly cheap to produce, fentanyl is cut into other drugs—particularly heroin and prescription pills—as a cost-saving measure by drug dealers. Synthetic opioids, of which fentanyl is among the most common, now kill more than 30,000 Americans per year, making them the deadliest drugs in U.S. history.

Gibby sensed the severity of Andi's problem when she would go into the bathroom "and just throw up like crazy," he says. "It was this overwhelming smell." Severe nausea is a common side effect of fentanyl.

One time Bennett and Gibby picked her up in San Diego. She was planning to visit a dealer.

"Let me buy some too," Bennett said.

"No," Andi replied adamantly. "You can't handle this."

Brushing off her concerns, Bennett began taking fentanyl with her. He knew the risks but was so obsessed with Andi that he didn't care; he wanted to feel what she was feeling. The euphoria was otherworldly, and sharing it with the person he suddenly loved more than anyone heightened the experience.

When they took fentanyl together, time stopped and their love was eternal, even as the drug overtook them and upended everything.

To Bennett's mother Liz Rhodes, their fate was Shakespearean. "They're like a Romeo and Juliet couple," she says.

During Bennett's childhood his father had a thriving international banking career and his nanny resembled Mary Poppins. Bennett was a martial arts prodigy and a surfer with infectious enthusiasm. "He could have done anything," says Liz. We're at her home just outside San Diego, the views are breathtaking. She's immaculately put together and quite accomplished herself, a corporate education specialist, former law school assistant dean and author.

At different points in his life Bennett was borderline-ADD and diagnosed with anxiety. In high school his parents divorced. He associated with a gang of violent La Jolla High School surfer kids known as the Groms. In 2016, just before his 16th birthday, a terrible car accident left him with a brain bleed. His girlfriend at the time helped him recover, and he became consumed by their relationship. When they broke up he left her a suicide note, and then drove to the Coronado Bridge, though he didn't jump.

More than a cry for help, it was a cry for love, a reflection of the instability in his life. "Bennett didn't have anyone asking him about his feelings for most of his life," says Gibby. "I don't really think he got a lot of constant love, and so when he got it finally, he was really obsessed with it."

Andi was the next girl to consume him. Born Andrea Galland, she lived in San Diego's inland Tierrasanta neighborhood and attended the experimental High Tech High charter school system, where she wrote fiction and dreamed of becoming a surgeon. The school could be lenient, and she was sharp enough to "skate by without doing much," says her friend Gabriel Jacobs. He and another friend said she was troubled by a particularly traumatic childhood event she preferred not to discuss.

Her sophomore year boyfriend Zion Maly saw her become increasingly preoccupied with drugs and drinking. "I would get random Snapchats of her, like, knocked out at parties, or with people snorting cocaine off her," he says. "I cheated on Andi, and then it went all downhill. She started drinking more, partying more, doing more drugs. I felt like I was responsible."

After high school she worked restaurant jobs and hung out with her best friend Jane. (Jane's name has been changed, she declined to be interviewed.) They grew as close as two young, starry-eyed people can be, residing together in San Diego and even sharing a bed. Vacationing in exotic locations, they posted swimsuit photos to Instagram; Jane was equally stunning, and a number of brands attempted to recruit them. Like many millennials, Andi also had a "Finsta," a private "fake Instagram" page showcasing the sillier and more inebriated side of her life.

According to two people who knew them well, Andi and Jane patronized the website Seeking Arrangement, where "sugar babies," often young women, are paired with "sugar daddies," usually successful older men. Being young and beautiful on the internet gave them access to fawning men, free clothes and wild parties.

They, along with Bennett, were poster children for the Instagram age, where young people seek fame and fulfillment online, and likes and new followers supply the dopamine kicks. Instagram has changed the way young people present themselves. In Romeo and Juliet, ballrooms were where the kids found each other, picked fights and fell in love. Today's ballroom is Instagram, and it's always open. Meanwhile, the red-light district of hookup sites and the anarchic bazaars of the dark web, where just about any drug is a few clicks away, add to a digital world that can be lethally alluring to kids who, like Bennett and Andi, are struggling with addiction and trauma.

As Andi descended into fentanyl abuse, she found herself associating with dubiously motivated guys with access to drugs. Smart, ambitious and seemingly headed for big things, her potential began to erode.

Synthetic opioids already kill more people annually than any drugs in American history, but having wreaked havoc on the East Coast fentanyl is only now arriving in California. In the San Diego region, fentanyl deaths jumped by 68 percent between 2018 and 2019.

Because of dealers' propensity to secretly cut fentanyl into other drugs, today's black-market pills and powders are especially dangerous for experimentation-minded young people. Fentanyl has been particularly deadly in hip-hop, killing rappers Lil Peep, Mac Miller and Lexii Alijai, as well as music legends Prince and Tom Petty.

Though rap artists including Bennett, who rapped under the name Beanie, glorify popping pills and drinking lean, virtually no rappers brag about doing hard drugs like fentanyl. But since fentanyl is increasingly cut into black-market pills that look exactly like Xanax or Per

cocet, it's often essentially the same thing.

Andi and Bennett snorted crushed-up tablets called Percocet 30s. These weren't pharmaceutical-grade pills containing acetaminophen and oxycodone; in fact, actual Percocet doesn't come in 30 milligram doses. These were counterfeit blue pills, made with fentanyl. Andi and Bennett knew this, but it didn't slow them down. In fact, it made their love feel more real. Bennett called the phenomenon "Perc love."

"It was the most magical high I ever felt. Literally I found true love in a person and in a drug," says Bennett's brother Mark Rhodes, who experienced Perc love himself while taking the pills with Jane, noting that it dulls one's libido even while it ignites one's infatuation. (He says he soon came to his senses, quit fentanyl and broke things off with her.)

For Bennett and Andi, this euphoria was wrapped up in their happiness with each other. They stayed up all night in his room, watching Gossip Girl in a haze or just kissing and cuddling. Perc love was easy to confuse with actual love.

They chased fantasies: gritty rap star and carefree traveler. The social media identities they fashioned for themselves papered over pain from their upbringings, and fentanyl served to smooth out the rough edges. When they snorted the powder, they had all the love in the world they needed. Perc love helped them be with each other, and it helped them be with themselves. But when the opioids wore off, their self-confidence plummeted, and reality set in.

As they grew closer, Andi shared her drug contact. She received the Percocet 30s from a man named Andrew, she told Bennett. Andrew was another man apparently auditioning to be her sugar daddy, but he wasn't an investment banker or wealthy financier. He was a fentanyl trafficker, with an operation stretching across the border.

Daren Andrew Lee goes by his middle name. Born in 1983, he grew up in Mormon country, living for a time in Salt Lake City and studying organic chemistry at Brigham Young University, Hawaii. With a white-collar résumé atypical for a dealer of street drugs, he arrived in San Diego to begin work with a biopharma company in early 2013.

But Andrew suffered personal setbacks, including becoming estranged from his young son and getting involved with heroin. In 2015, he received probation after selling heroin to undercover cops, according to court records, he "told officers he . . frequently crossed into Mexico to bring drugs back over the border to sell." In 2017, he was charged with misdemeanor possession of controlled substances including heroin, and he successfully completed a drug treatment program. (For all the well-deserved bluster against the war on drugs, drug sentences have actually been reduced quite a bit in recent years.)

Somehow, he maintained steady work in the pharmaceutical industry. According to his LinkedIn profile, he started as a clinical operations consultant in May 2018 for Acadia Pharmaceuticals, a San Diego-based company making medications for disorders including Parkinson's disease. He was hired temporarily through employment agency Suna Solutions, his page notes, and under his areas of experience he lists "Opioid Induced Constipation." "This is by FAR the best job I have had in the industry in over 10 years!" he wrote.

Life was good. He bought a BMW and moved into a luxury apartment overlooking the Padres' baseball stadium. He displayed his amateur photography work on his Instagram page—beaches at sunset and dazzling downtown cityscapes.

It's unclear when Andrew began trafficking fentanyl pills from Mexico or how he began his courtship of Andi and Jane, but the two events overlapped. He sought to impress them by offering gifts like shoes and watches, says Gibby, who grew close to both women. "He was creepy and weird," Gibby goes on, adding Andi and Jane were only "using" him for his fentanyl access. "They could do it because they were very attractive, and they had this addiction."

In the fall of 2019, he posted a picture of the three of them in his elevator. For the photo, Andrew donned sunglasses and attempted to look suave. Jane and Andi wear short skirts, their arms draped over him. Apparently attempting to be funny, Andrew wrote: "Can't believe what progress [Jane and Andi] have made since I met them panhandling, I'd say they clean up nice. . #futurehousemates."

Bennett's father David—a large guy whose face, like his son's, radiates curiosity and kindness—says that, in the last week of November, Bennett detailed to his parents conversations he and Andi had with Andrew. David listened carefully as Bennett laid out Andrew's attempts to recruit Andi and Jane to move into his apartment and help him expand his fentanyl business.

According to Bennett's parents, Andrew explained his smuggling operation and told Bennett and Andi his position with Acadia helped insulate him. "Lee bragged about using his pharma company's credentials to get easily back and forth across the Mexican border," David says. (Andrew did not respond to requests for comment; nor did Acadia Pharmaceuticals.)

In the spring of 2019 Bennett's parents caught wind of his fentanyl habit, and his mother Liz rushed him off to Hawaii for a week, to sober up. He swam in the ocean and played ukulele, an instrument he learned from the now-deceased Chargers great Junior Seau, a family friend. Liz expressed her concern about Bennett's drug-centered relationship with Andi. Bennett pledged to stay clean, he hoped to help Andi

The red-light district of hookup sites and the anarchic bazaars of the dark web add to a digital world that can be lethally alluring.

beat fentanyl too.

"He was going to save Andi, then save himself, and then they would live a clean life together," says Liz.

That summer Bennett moved into a new apartment in Hollywood, just off Sunset Boulevard, with his brother Mark. It was a young hip-hopper's Shangri-La, a crash pad filled with bongs, top-line recording equipment and rolls of fake $100 bills for music videos. Mark is a driven rap producer and singer-songwriter known as MTStreets, and he and Bennett attended the Los Angeles Recording School. They called their music together "Hollywood trap"—a melding of the glossy and the grimy. Mark is most in his element when blasting his music between pulls from the water pipe, rapping along with Bennett's best tracks.

Those who knew their backgrounds might blanche at their images as gritty hip-hop artists—Bennett once wrote in an Instagram post, "Hard to believe we came from nothing"—considering their upbringing in tony La Jolla, and that their mother leased the Hollywood apartment. Still, hip-hop has always been about remaking oneself, and the two brothers' obvious love for the trap genre helped them pull it off.

Having worked up a business plan for his music career with his dad, Bennett was now preparing his debut mixtape, Never Comfortable, spending down his five-figure settlement from his high school car accident on well-known collaborators—including associates of his hero, Gucci Mane, a rapper who glamorizes Percocet in his music.

"We had dreams of winning Grammys, of being millionaires," Mark says. Bennett built up an Instagram following of nearly 10,000, posing with gold chains, vape pens and stacks of cash.

Mark and Bennett drew into their orbit local performers and impresarios, including co-workers from restaurants where they worked. Paul Fleming, a Los Angeles rapper known as Cloud, was shocked when Bennett announced his sudden resignation from Jersey Mike's, tossing aside his hat and apron mid-shift and walking out. "We have a higher calling," Bennett had said.

This impressed Cloud, who also welcomed Andi and her glamorous energy into his social circle. "She was like Marilyn Monroe," he says. "They were next."

But behind the scenes fentanyl was back in Andi and Bennett's lives. While high everything was great, but when they crashed they were miserable, and the only balm was more fentanyl. Andi began to withdraw. While she maintained admiration and even love for Bennett, her commitment to the relationship waned. "But Bennett was not letting it go," Gibby says. "Like a puzzle piece that doesn't fit."

His addiction out of control, Bennett agreed to check into Passages Malibu, an elite treatment center known for its steep price (as much as $100,000 a month for a private room) and for not adhering to a 12-step recovery model. There he experienced the agony of detox—"It was like skin was being ripped off of his body," remembers his father—only to find even greater agony on the other side.

Perc love helped them be with each other, and it helped them be with themselves.

On Sunday, November 24, after being unable to reach Andi by

He used an app to discov- er her phone's location. It was in the DEA's office in San Diego.

ner. "What are some of our best family memories?" he asked.

His mother was perplexed. "Bennett, you have a lifetime of amazing stuff," she said. "At home I'll pull out every photo album and we'll reconnect you to your wonderful childhood."

Bennett spent his first night out of rehab at home, with Mark keeping close tabs on him. The next day, November 30, they boarded a train to San Diego.

They planned to celebrate a late Thanksgiving with the family, but when Liz picked up the boys at the train station, Bennett wasn't himself. He seemed "unhinged" and "drugged," she said—but not on fentanyl. He had apparently taken lorazepam, an anti-anxiety medicine best known as Ativan, that Liz believes he received from Passages. Like Xanax, Ativan is a benzodiazepine. It's a downer that, when combined with fentanyl, another downer, is particularly lethal.

An argument broke out. Bennett, reeling, made nasty accusations against his mother, and she told him to get his act together. Bennett and Mark eventually decided to spend the night at the Carlsbad apartment of their friends William and Hannah. First, Bennett visited Andi's parents to offer his condolences. They took him in like a son, and each consoled the other. At some point that day he also made his way downtown. Near Andrew's apartment, he met a dealer and purchased six or seven Percocet 30s.

Back in Carlsbad he acted like nothing had happened. He said goodnight to his brother and friends. "He gave us all a hug; he thanked us for letting him crash," says William. "I felt that everything would be okay. It was a safe place." Bennett went into William's bedroom and closed the door.

In the morning, Mark checked on his brother. The door was locked; he picked it. He found Bennett face down on the bed. His body was hard. Mark turned him over and saw that his face was purple.

Bennett had died exactly a week after Andi. He was 19. The entire relationship, from Andi's appearance at Bennett's door to their fatal overdoses, lasted less than a year.

"It was almost like an out-of-body experience" hearing his son was dead, says David. "Just the worst feeling a human could feel."

Bennett left a note of sorts, by way of a short video found on his phone. "I love everything and everyone so much," reads the caption of the video, in which Bennett flashes a series of cryptic gang signs, and then shows off a line of fentanyl on the bathroom lavatory, the same line that presumably killed him.

Some family members believe he knew the dose would be fatal, and

thus his death was suicide. His mother isn't sure. "I don't think it was intentional suicide," says Liz. "I do believe he knew the risks. Maybe he didn't care. But I think he simply went back to using because he was in such a fragile, painful time."

Ultimately, Bennett fulfilled both of his desires following Andi's death: He numbed himself into oblivion, and he got retribution. Shortly before he died, Bennett explained Daren Andrew Lee's smuggling operation, says David.

Andrew went to Mexico frequently, Bennett told him, allegedly purchasing some 7,000 pills per week for about $3 each. Once brought back across the border, he sold the pills for $25 to $30 each.

David relayed this information to the DEA, who put Andrew's name into a database. Only three days after Bennett's death, on December 4, 2019, Andrew returned from Mexico through the San Ysidro land port of entry. His passport was flagged, and Andrew was found with two Ziploc bags, according to court records, one containing 21 grams of "blue circular pills," which tested positive for fentanyl, and another harboring 23 grams of "white bar-shaped pills," which tested positive for heroin. Though the purity of the pills isn't known, this was likely a large amount considering 2 milligrams of pure fentanyl can kill. "Lee admitted to law enforcement that he obtained heroin and fentanyl pills in Mexico with the intent to distribute them in the United States," read his court records. He pleaded guilty and, in January, was sentenced to four years, two of them suspended.

Both Andi's and Bennett's families remain devastated. Bennett's brother Mark—his best friend, close collaborator, and fellow dreamer—has sorrow in his eyes as he goes through the motions of everyday life in the apartment where his brother no longer lives. The sadness is tempered only by anger. He has blame to go around, but maintains especially strong words for Daren Andrew Lee. "He knew Andi died, and he kept selling. He knew Bennett died, and he kept selling," says Mark, his voice thickening. "Basically, that's the definition of a serial killer."

Ultimately, Andi and Bennett were overtaken by the latest, deadliest trends in music and drug culture. Monied kids have dreamed big and partied wild for decades, but they had the bad fortune to come of age when a new, ultra-potent chemical was killing more Americans than any drug previously, at a time when the most popular music culture glamorized it by calling it something it isn't.

Bennett's parents have immersed themselves in trying to get justice for Bennett—pushing for murder charges against Andrew and investigating why Acadia Pharmaceuticals took him on in the first place. They are also working to launch awareness programs geared toward youth, many of whom have no idea that any black-market pill or powder could be spiked with a lethal dose of fentanyl. Liz wants to focus on music and video, mediums "that are easily consumable via social media," she says. Liz is also committed to "reducing shame and bringing the epidemic into family conversations."

"If we save just one life," says David Rhodes, "it's worth it."

Bennett's dream of remaining by Andi's side has come true, in a sense. He is buried close to her at El Camino Memorial Park in San Diego, perhaps only 40 feet apart.

"He had a dream and wanted a life with this girl," says Liz. "Neither is to blame for the other's death. They were adults dancing too close to the flame."

Bennett's parents have immersed themselves in trying to get justice.

You Don't Know KING NOIRE

BY **ANITA LITTLE**

From quarantine, the renowned adult star opens up to Playboy about fatherhood, black joy and the responsibility of being an artist

When I call Hasan Salaam, he's quarantining at his home in Tampa, Florida. I hear dishes clattering and a child cooing in the background.

The 39-year-old is confident but ruminative, always allowing some silence to pass before he responds to a question. Salaam has been on the move—touring in some form—for more than 15 years. Now during the pandemic, he's been forced to pause for the first time in quite a while, and he's basking in the stillness. Besides, he has an all-consuming reason to be home irrespective of a pandemic that's showing no signs of abating: a bouncy, bubbly two-year-old son named Majesty.

"Not being able to go shoot or see clients all over the world is semi-frustrating. But at the same time, I got this one opportunity to watch my son grow up," Salaam says. "I get to see all these little things he's picking up. He's doing colors and shapes and letters and numbers, and I get to watch all of that every day."

Salaam's quarantine-era fatherhood goes as one might expect. He spends the day changing diapers, cooking meals for his family and going on walks with his son. When he has a bit of downtime, he works on his rap music, plays football and responds to the daily inundation of messages on his OnlyFans account.

Salaam's alter ego—what most of his followers know him by—is King Noire, and he's one of the most well-known male entertainers in the adult industry.

His beginnings were humble enough. At 18, he was kicked out of his home. Unmoored, he bounced from couch to couch until a female friend asked him to appear in an adult magazine with her. His interest was piqued, and the rest is history.

"People said I was good at it," he says. "So I picked it up. It just kind of happened more than it was completely planned out."

From there King Noire started doing private cuckolding gigs, BDSM sessions and other adult work. Being on the East Coast limited his studio opportunities since the region wasn't a hub of the porn industry at the time, so he left to teach creative writing at a public school in his home state of New Jersey while doing community organizing with social justice nonprofits. He missed adult work, though, and also recognized an opportunity to create a change that he had yet to see in the adult world, the representation of black men.

"I noticed that, especially within the black community, there weren't a lot of performers that were a full person," he says. "So I decided if I'm going to do this again, I'm going to give you all of me. I'm not just a dick and some floggers. I'm also going to talk about justice, equal rights, music, my family, cooking. I'm going to talk about all these things I enjoy, and give you an entire person."

King Noire recounts some incidents when he encountered racism and bigotry on major sets, including being asked to play a thug, a janitor or a prison inmate. When he called out these roles as racially offensive, the studios simply didn't book him again. With the heightened attention being paid to the Black Lives Matter movement after the extrajudicial killings of countless black Americans such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, many industries are facing internal reckonings over how they treat their black workers. The adult industry isn't exempt.

"I've been on set and called a nigger by another performer. The company, along with the agency I was working with, was like, 'Yeah, that's fine. Just keep working,'" he says. "I refused, and it became a whole thing. There is a problem in the industry, and it needs to be spoken about. I come from a place where you either speak on it or you ain't shit. You shouldn't show your face if you don't stand up for your people."

How black men are portrayed in the adult industry doesn't veer too far from how they're perceived in

> **"There is a problem in the industry, and it needs to be spoken about. I come from a place where you either speak on it or you ain't shit."**

Some people come into this profession and burn out really quick because they think, I'm going to bust it open and I'll be rich tomorrow. That's not how it works.

society. The term "black buck" emerged in the post-Reconstruction United States and was used to paint black men as savage and brutish. The idea of black men as more aggressive, as sexually insatiable, has persisted to this day. You see it in the oversexed and one-dimensional depictions of black masculinity in porn. A search of "BBC" on adult sites or a visit to Blacked.com proves this. When it comes to how black bodies are seen in porn, the industry suffers from a severe lack of imagination and instead reinforces tired tropes.

"We're always told as black people that our sex is supposed to look a certain way," Salaam says. "We're supposed to be, as black men, the stud, or, as black women, the dominatrix. We're not allowed to have a softer side or a romantic, passionate, sensual side."

He decided that instead of depending on the often racist and problematic porn studio ecosystem, he would build his own brand. He wanted to show the full range of black people and give black pleasure the nuance it deserves.

And he would do it with Jasmine Johnson (professionally known as Jet Setting Jasmine), a fellow adult performer he fell in love with after they joined forces as business partners performing at sex parties in New York. Johnson is also the mother of his two-year-old, and they co-parent their two teenage daughters, Mani and Star, as well. Salaam and Johnson started Royal Fetish Films, an award-winning independent porn studio that aims to bring more inclusive porn to an industry that too often traffics in stereotypes.

"Our clientele was mostly black women between the age of 25 and 45," Salaam says. "So many of them would ask, 'Where is good black porn? Where can I find black porn where we're not being called names or where people are actually lotioned up before they get on set? Where's the passion, the romance or the kinkiness? So we decided: Let's shoot something on our own."

In addition to producing original adult content, the duo did pre-pandemic live shows as part of a nationwide tour and will soon debut the third season of Royal Fetish Radio, a podcast where they tackle everything from polyamory to porn and parenting. Last year, Salaam also released The Royal Fetish Experience, a provocative rap album that details moments in BDSM and kink.

Within their Royal Fetish empire, Salaam and Johnson paint a compelling portrait that we rarely get to see in media, adult or not: a rich and layered representation of black love. The art they create together is a welcome refuge from an adult landscape that is mostly barren of honest depictions of black sexuality. There's frequently no allowance for the range of thought and feeling black people experience in their bedroom lives. Salaam sees sex as "the ultimate form of creation," and it's his mission to show it unapologetically.

"It's a way of communicating without speaking, to truly learn someone's body language, to be inside another person, to have another person inside you," he says. "However you get down, it is a connection beyond just conversation."

What Salaam knows intimately but what many refuse to acknowledge is that the adult industry is like any other industry: You have to work extremely hard to build a following and be self-sufficient. And he's had to do that against a societal backdrop that stigmatizes both sex workers and black men.

"As soon as I wake up in the morning, I'm responding to emails, I'm posting, I'm doing all these things to keep my business alive. It's a nonstop thing," he says. "I think some people come into this profession and burn out really quick because they think, I'm going to bust it open and I'll be rich tomorrow. That's not how it works. This shit is tireless."

To see King Noire is to recognize him in all of his nuance and complexity: as a father, a life partner, a businessman, an artist and, yes, an adult performer. Hopefully, the seismic societal shift currently happening will force more people to see black men and adult stars—the fraught intersection King Noire must navigate to survive and thrive—through a more humanized lens. Until that happens, he'll stay focused on protecting his art, his family and his community.

"I was told very young by my moms: If you're not doing shit for your people, no matter what it is you're doing, then you're wasting your time."

DRIVEN BY
PURPOSE

Harper Rae

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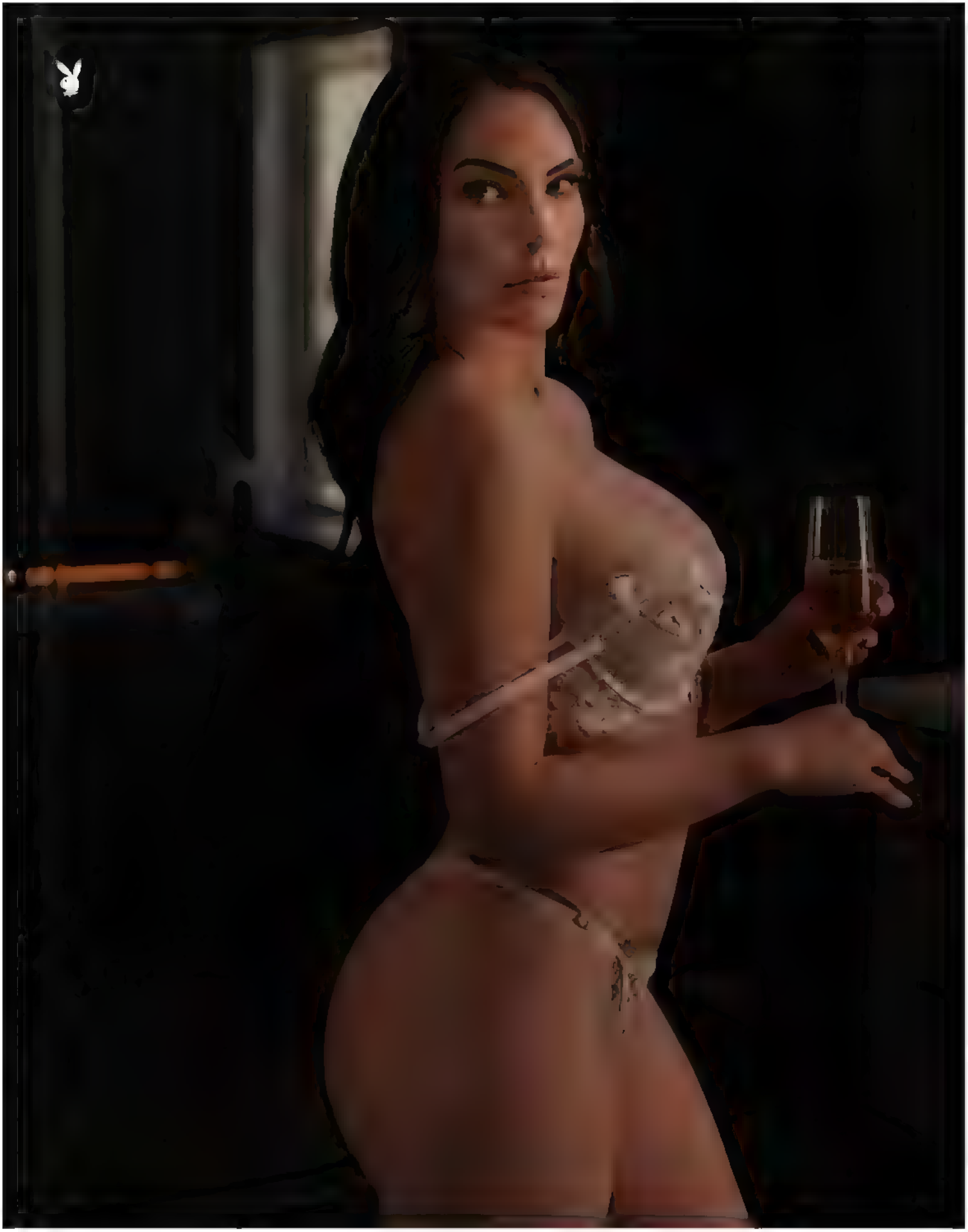


We're happy to have you featured. The pleasure is all mine. I'm excited to share a little more of myself with you.

If you could write a letter to your younger self, what would you say? Stay curious, stay kind, and trust your gut.

What's a childhood dream you've held on to? Never a perfect life, just one filled with love, laughter, and my family.

Looking back, what advice would you give to your younger self? Play smarter, not safer. And never confuse silence with weakness.

What do people often get wrong about you? They assume I'm always confident.

Do you have any hidden talents? If so, what is it? I can read people. It's a mix of intuition, observation, and energy.

What's your guilty pleasure snack? Dark Chocolate with a glass of white wine.

What's the boldest decision you've ever made that changed your life? Walking away from comfort and choosing me.

What's one thing you've always wanted to do but haven't dared to try yet? Disappear and live off the grid just me and nature.

What's a powerful lesson life has taught you that you think everyone should learn? Rejection is redirection. If it didn't work out, it wasn't supposed to. Trust the re-route.

What's something that once felt like a failure, but became your biggest lesson? Loving the wrong person taught me how to be the right one for myself.

What's the legacy you hope to leave behind? That smart can be sexy, that elegance can be fierce, and softness is strength.

What advice would you give to someone who feels stuck or uninspired right now? Shake things up. Change your scenery.

Thanks so much for your time, Where can our readers follow you on social to stay up to date on what you're up to? @HarperRaeXO

Playboy Interview

KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR

A candid conversation with one of the greatest basketball players of all time

INTERVIEW BY **LARRY LINDERMAN** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RON MESAROS**

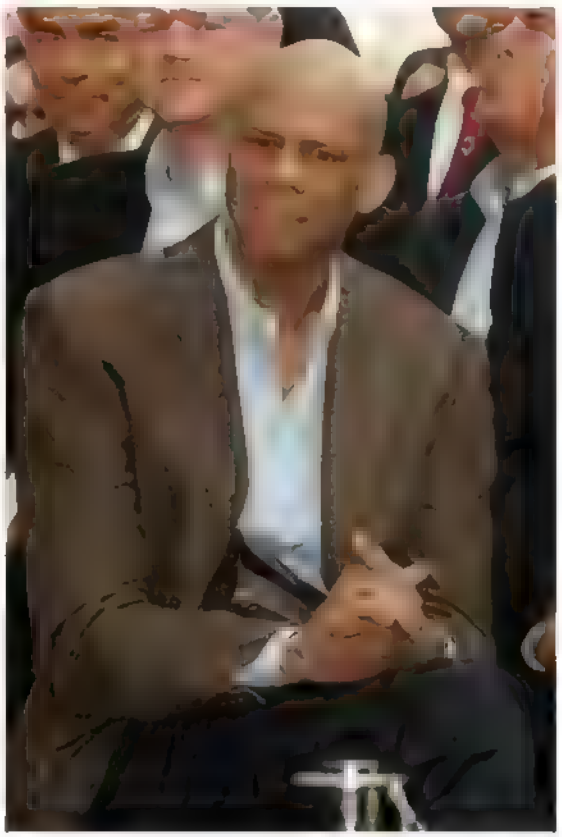
At the advanced age of 39, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar—a dinosaur by professional basketball standards—continues to act less like a lion in winter than like a stallion in spring. The National Basketball Association's only active player to have graduated from college before the start of the Seventies, Abdul-Jabbar, a graceful, 7'2" scoring machine, has virtually rewritten the league's record books. Now nearing the end of his 17th pro season (the only N.B.A. player ever to reach that milestone), Abdul-Jabbar adds to his fistful of career records each time he sets foot on court.

Before the start of the season, he had already become the N.B.A.'s all-time leader in scoring, in most field goals attempted and made and in most blocked shots. By the end of the current campaign, his one-man assault on N.B.A. stats will also include most minutes and most games ever played by a pro. Forget such items as his appearance in 15 straight All-Star games and his place as the N.B.A.'s all-time scoring leader in postseason play.

Oddly enough, Abdul-Jabbar cares very little about all of the above. He just wants to win, period. As the captain and heart and soul of the Los Angeles Lakers, he led his team last season to its third league champi-

onship in the past six years. He's intent on a repeat performance this season and, with Los Angeles having easily won the Pacific Division title, it seems likely that the N.B.A. championship series will again pit the Lakers against their archrivals, the Boston Celtics. Says Milwaukee Bucks coach Don Nelson, p"The Celtics and the Lakers are head and shoulders above the rest of us, and we just have to face it."

Nelson and most other N.B.A. coaches have also wondered aloud how Abdul-Jabbar can continue performing without showing any signs of wear and tear. If anything, he has actually improved in recent years. Last season, he averaged 22 points per game—his highest figure since the 1981–1982 season—and his .599 field-goal average was the second highest of his career. Singer Neil Young used to complain that rust never sleeps, he obviously had never met anyone with Abdul-Jabbar's natural undercoating. Time simply refuses to dim his shooting eye. His sky hook, which Playboy once described as p"the most beautiful basketball shot ever invented," remains as eerily accurate and unstoppable as ever.



Despite his athletic brilliance, however, Abdul-Jabbar has long been one of sport's most enigmatic—and least popular—superstars. For most of his career, he has had a distant relationship with the press and public alike. Much of that can be traced to his troubled adolescence. Born on April 16, 1947, in New York City, Ferdinand Lewis Alcindor was a studious, shy youngster raised by middle-class parents. Unfortunately, he grew up at a time when blacks were still subject to segregation, Jim Crow laws and lynchings, and all that left its mark. His parents wanted their son to get a good Catholic education and sent him to Power Memorial High School in Manhattan. Alcindor excelled at academics and basketball and was close to Jack Donohue, the school's basketball coach. But then, during half time of a sloppy game against a weak opponent, Donohue tried to fire him up by telling him, p"You're acting just like a nigger!" Not a bright move. Alcindor went into a shell at that point.

While a student at UCLA, Alcindor renounced Catholicism and became a Moslem. In 1971, he publicly announced that he had changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Arabic for p"noble and powerful servant" of Allah. Abdul-Jabbar then avoided the press the way Moslems avoid alcohol and barbecued ribs. It wasn't until after he split up with his personal spiritual advisor that he began opening up to people, a process that accelerated after his house burned down in January 1983. Abdul-Jabbar's fans knew that their man had lost thousands of jazz records in the blaze; when fans from cities around the league began sending him records, Abdul-Jabbar—almost like Sally Field at last year's Academy Awards—suddenly realized, "They like me." Since then, his view of America and the world has become much more sanguine.

To interview the man most experts consider the greatest player in the history of basketball, Playboy sent free-lancer Lawrence Linderman to meet with Abdul-Jabbar in Los Angeles. Linderman reports.

"Even though I'd suggested we interview Abdul-Jabbar, I regarded the assignment with more apprehension than I'd felt before any of my 22 previous p'Playboy Interviews.' Some years ago, I had interviewed him for a short Playboy feature and had come away thinking I'd never met a man so filled with gloom and icy anger. To my great surprise and relief, he no longer had a psychic chip on his shoulder. To his great surprise and relief, he had ended his isolated, alienated existence. In some ways, he's almost like a monk who, having observed a lifelong, self-imposed vow of silence, one day discovers how joyous it can be to get in touch with the world—and with himself as well.

"When we met, Abdul-Jabbar was in the process of moving into a huge stone mansion built on the Bel Air site where his ranch house had burned down three years before. During the couple of weeks we devoted to the interview, workmen were still putting the finishing touches on the outside of the house. Inside, the cavernous place was mostly bare. Although Abdul-Jabbar had bought furniture six months before moving in, a shipping company had misplaced his things, and when I saw him about a month later in New York, his furniture was still somewhere in transit.

"In any case, he had a table and chairs in his kitchen, and that's where we began our conversations. A few months before, he had announced his intention to bow out of basketball after the 1986-1987 season; that provided the opening subject for our interview."

PLAYBOY: Not long after you said that the current season would be your last, the Los Angeles Lakers announced that you'd agreed to play one more year. Do you really intend to play next season, or was that announcement a smoke screen enabling you to duck a yearlong series of g"Farewell, Kareem" nights?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Oh, no, barring injury, I'll probably play one

more year, but I won't make that decision until the end of the playoffs. If I don't think I can play up to my expectations, then I'll quit. In all probability, though, I'll be out there again next fall.

PLAYBOY: You've come close to retiring during each of the past three years. Why haven't you? Does the game mean more to you than perhaps you suspected?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Well, first of all, it's a great way to make a living, and even though I've probably had enough adrenaline rushes to last three lifetimes, I still enjoy the competition. I've also enjoyed proving certain people wrong. After the '83 season, the Lakers didn't sign me and I became a free agent—and no one offered me a contract for months. I was out there all alone, and a lot of people just wrote me off. They felt that at 36, I was on my way out, but eventually the Lakers and I got together and, lo and behold, here I am, still hanging around. We won the N.B.A. championship last year, and I had a very successful season, which dispelled all that talk.

PLAYBOY: You'll be 40 before the end of next season. What inroads have the years made on your ability?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I really haven't seen any. In fact, because of my conditioning program, I think I'm probably realizing more of my physical potential than I did ten years ago. I always knew that I had to pay close attention to my cardiovascular condition, strength training and stretching, but I don't think I finally got all three of them straight until a few years ago, and that's what's kept me in the game. Believe me, if you don't have it physically, it doesn't matter whether you want to play or not—it just doesn't happen.

PLAYBOY: Are you saying you don't have to pace yourself differently during games?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I don't, no. I've found that it's better to play as well as I can for as long as I can. After that, the coach can take me out; but I think that if you check, you'll find that I've been playing more minutes than any other player on the team. I'm calling it quits after next season only because I want to spend time with my children, but I really think I could play a few more years at the same level.

PLAYBOY: You're no doubt aware that most sports fans have long considered you enigmatic, if not downright sullen and hostile. How did that come about?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Basically, it was my own fault, because I never tried to communicate with sportswriters; and as a result of all the negative interaction between me and the press, I got a bad image. I was described as distant, cold, etc.—but it didn't matter to me. I knew that if I talked to these guys and decided to court the press systematically, I'd get certain benefits, but I just didn't care. I always had my guard up, and I was unapproachable. I think I felt that way until a couple of years ago, when I finally got tired of being bum-rapped in the press. I found that when I worked just a little bit at trying to communicate and smooth things over, I got a great result. People seemed to feel a lot differently about me. Their image of me and their support of me have taken on a different tone. It's much more like, "He's one of us." I had to work for that, and I had to learn about that, and I'm glad I finally absorbed those lessons and made them useful in my life. Being liked and having people come up to me and feeling comfortable about it have made the adjustment worth the effort.

PLAYBOY: Why had you decided not to talk to the press in the first place?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Probably because when I was in high school and then at UCLA, sportswriters assumed that the teams I was on would win championships. That idea of foregone success took the thrill out of playing. Because of all the attention and all the great expectations, there was just no sense of discovery, no surprises. They'd already put me at the top, they had said that's where I belonged, and by doing so, they took away the fun of it. Any success I had was going to be taken for granted, and a knew it. And I was right.

PLAYBOY: You mean you got pissed off just because sportswriters correctly assessed your ability?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It didn't piss me off, but it was a downer. In my senior year of high school, there were 60 other players at least seven feet tall who were going on to college, yet it seemed to be a foregone conclusion that I'd lead whatever school I went to to the N.C.A.A. championship. That put pressure on me, but fortunately, my coach at UCLA was John Wooden, and his whole thing was, "We'll ignore all that talk and just play basketball."

PLAYBOY: UCLA did, indeed, win national championships during the three years you played there. When you graduated, a lot of sportswriters called you the greatest college ballplayer of all time, and nowadays they're calling you the greatest pro of all time. How do you react to such praise?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It's very flattering and it's nice to be considered in that light, but I don't get too excited about it. I know that I've been very successful and that it's hard to measure success.

PLAYBOY: Modesty aside, have you ever suspected that you might be the best player in the game?

ABDUL-JABBAR: At times, yes, but basketball is a funny game. There are certain things forwards have to do, other things that guards have to do, and centers have something else that they have to do. It's hard for me to measure myself against players like Julius Erving, Dave DeBusschere, Chet Walker, Elgin Baylor, John Havlicek and all of the other great forwards I've competed against. Same thing with guards: I just can't find any basis for comparing myself with players like Oscar Robertson and Magic Johnson.

PLAYBOY: You, Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Russell are overwhelmingly regarded as the three greatest centers of all time. How do you compare yourself with them?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Hard to say, because the game has changed since they left it. Today, N.B.A. teams have to shoot within 24 seconds, and the three-second lane is 16 feet wide. Wilt played a long

There's a lot of pragmatism and flexibility in Islam, but most of the world doesn't know that, because the people who make headlines and support the Islamic cause are coming from a very radical political position.

time with a 12-foot-wide lane, which meant he could get closer to the basket before taking his shots, so it's hard to compare what he did with what I've done. Still, how many players are going to average more than 50 points a game, as he did one season? Bill Russell never had overwhelming individual stats, but he was the key ingredient in the greatest dynasty in the game. Yet I can't compare myself with him, either, because basketball is a team game, not an individual game. When I was in the seventh grade, I started going to Madison Square Garden regularly, and I learned how to win by watching Russell play. Bill played for his teammates. He passed the ball a lot, he rebounded and started the fast break and was always there plugging up the middle on defense—he was content to do that. Russell showed me that if you play for the other guys on the team, you get a lot more out of everybody.

PLAYBOY: What did Chamberlain show you?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Chamberlain played the game the same way Russell did, except he scored so much more. But his teams had to get more points from him. He'd score 45 points and his teams would still lose.

PLAYBOY: One year, Chamberlain led the N.B.A. in assists. Do you think it might have been a reaction—

ABDUL-JABBAR: To everybody's saying that he shot too much? Yes, absolutely. Wilt had to fight people's dissatisfaction that his teams didn't win. There he was, this great dominating player, and his teams didn't win championships. Well, Wilt wasn't playing for the right team. As an individual, he was in a class by himself, but his teammates—they were O.K., but not the supporting cast Russell had.

PLAYBOY: Do you think Chamberlain is still frustrated by the way people perceive him and his place in basketball history?

ABDUL-JABBAR: If you want to get Wilt ticked off or bitter, just mention Bill Russell. You will incite him.

PLAYBOY: In 1984, you supplanted Chamberlain as the leading scorer in pro basketball history, mostly on the strength of your hook shot, which your coach, Pat Riley, calls "the ultimate offensive weapon." Most followers of the sport—and players, as well—think your patented sky hook is the most difficult shot in basketball. Do you agree?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Not really, no. I think if you start shooting the hook early enough—and I had the form and release down pat when I was a freshman in high school—it becomes no more difficult than any other shot. And it has one built-in advantage. Because you release the hook from high up and behind your body, nobody can get a hand on it.

PLAYBOY: No one has ever blocked your hook shot?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I think maybe once or twice somebody I hadn't seen came in from behind me and blocked it, but players who've guarded me, no, they couldn't get to it. Nate Thurmond, who played for the Golden State Warriors, was the best in the league as far as playing me one on one went, but even he never blocked the shot. These days, nobody gets to play me one on one anymore. The last time that happened was against Houston; they let Akeem Olajuwon play me one on one for a quarter, and that was it.

PLAYBOY: How do teams defend against you?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Oh, every time I get the ball, at least two and sometimes three guys converge on me. That happens every night, because I'm a target, somebody who has to be taken care of.

PLAYBOY: How do opponents try to take care of you?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Guys do anything they can get away with, such as using their shoulders and forearms—normal play includes just about everything short of throwing blows. Rick Mahorn, now with the Detroit Pistons, has a lot of lower-body strength, and he's one of the players who'll put a knee up under my behind and actually lift my feet off the floor.

PLAYBOY: But they still don't shut you down. If you hadn't been so consistent with your hook, do you think you'd have been able to do more with other shots?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I would have had to, but I never really considered it, because my hook shot is very accurate. And when I sink it, it makes opposing centers mad. They really get angry. It's not like I'm somebody who's doing a physical number on them. I'm more like somebody with a foil who's sticking them every time.

PLAYBOY: How mad have opponents gotten?

ABDUL-JABBAR: To the point of being funny. Mahorn and I really got into it one night. I'd scored a lot of points, but toward the end of the game—a game that the Lakers had no chance of winning—Rick turned to me and said, g"No, you can't shoot the hook anymore." Next time the Lakers came down the court, Rick positioned himself way up on my left side—the side I go to when I shoot the hook—so I immediately turned the other way and made a lay-up. Mahorn shouted, "Yeah, that's right, Kareem, but forget the hook—that's out!"

PLAYBOY: Which players are difficult for you to guard?

ABDUL-JABBAR: My defense in the pivot is pretty effective. The toughest guy for me throughout my career was Dan Issel, who's retired now. Dan could hit 20-foot jump shots all night long, so I'd have to get out there with him, which left the middle open for his teammates.

PLAYBOY: You're the N.B.A.'s all-time leader in scoring and blocked shots; but in any given year, you're rarely among the league's top ten rebounders. Why not?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Well, I led the N.B.A. in rebounds the first year I played for the Lakers, which was also a year when the team did horribly. Our whole concept now is team rebounding, which is why I don't rebound numerically the way I used to. The idea is that if I get 20 rebounds and the rest of the team gets three, we're going to lose, so everybody on the team has to rebound. My biggest responsibility is to prevent the guy I'm guarding from getting an offensive rebound, because second shots are like nails in your

Our democracy has never been perfect, and it was hard for Americans to admit that in respect to blacks. Maybe that was understandable, given the fact that blacks weren't brought here to become presidents of corporations.

coffin. When my man can't get near the basket, Magic or Maurice Lucas or Kurt Rambis will be there to get the rebound

PLAYBOY: Who are the league's toughest rebounders?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Oh, Akeem Olajuwon is very good because of his agility. Jeff Ruland and Jack Sikma are great rebounders, too. But if you asked us who's number one in that department, I think we'd all say Moses Malone. He never stops coming at you and he's strong as a bull.

PLAYBOY: In his Playboy Interview [March 1984], Malone told us he sometimes feels he should wear boxing gloves on the court. Is that what it's like for all N.B.A. centers?

ABDUL-JABBAR: No, that's just the way Moses plays. He's very physical and very smart. In 1983, the 76ers blew us out of the finals in four straight games, and Moses was just relentless. I had to appraise what I was doing wrong insofar as the way I played him, so I went to Pete Newell, who has a summer camp for teaching pros the fundamentals of whatever it is they're not doing right. Newell's the professor—about 25 years ago, when he coached the University of California, his team won the N.C.A.A. championship. Anyway, I took Pete some video tape of our '83 Play-off games against the 76ers and asked him to critique my performance against Moses.

PLAYBOY: What were you doing wrong?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Specifically, I was holding my hands at my sides and, just before a rebound, Moses would lean against me and pin one of my arms to my side. He'd knock me off balance for a split second, which was enough to let him get the rebound. Moses makes his living doing things like that. Newell showed me that I had to keep my hands and arms up higher and use my butt to knock people's weight off me so that I didn't get thrown off balance. The next two years—'84 and '85—my rebound average went up.

PLAYBOY: Basketball is supposedly a noncontact sport, yet it's become very physical in the past decade. Why?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Well, the closer you are to the basket, the more physical the game gets. Coaches generally want players to take shots from as close to the basket as possible, because the closer you are, the higher your shooting percentage. What happens is that everybody tries to get as close to the basket as he can. On offense, I'm not allowed anywhere near the basket. That's the book on me. Play me as physically as possible, to the point where you take a few fouls and see what the refs will let you get away with. I'll tell you, by the end of the season, I feel like a piece of chopped meat. The area under the hoop is serious, serious territory, and because centers play closest to the basket, they have the most serious job. There's very little levity under the basket. That's where most people end up bleeding.

PLAYBOY: Don't you think you're confirming what Malone had to say about wearing boxing gloves during games?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Oh, I'm definitely not into fisticuffs.

PLAYBOY: Then why have you been involved in fights on court?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I think you're probably referring to the Kent Benson episode, and if what led up to it happened again, I probably wouldn't react the same way. In 1977, in a game against Milwaukee, I was just standing in the lane, waiting for the ball to come down court, when Benson, who was then a rookie, looked at me, looked up court and then just fired an elbow into my solar plexus. That was one thing I wasn't going to tolerate.

PLAYBOY: You'd never caught an elbow?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I'd never gotten one that was so blatant and that also knocked the wind out of me. I mean, when he hit me, I went down—and when I jumped up, about seven seconds later, I was outraged. I threw one right hand at him, and I've never decked anyone so badly. When the league finished its investigation, I got fined, and I'll never get over that, because it was as if I were the villain. The film clearly shows that wasn't the case.

PLAYBOY: You once said that before games, you work up a sense of antagonism toward the center who'll be guarding you. Is it really as grim as all that?

ABDUL-JABBAR: If I said antagonism, I didn't really mean it in a personal way against other players. And even though the level of competition is very high, I've gotten friendly with guys like Mahorn and Issel. Dan's a funny man, and he'd always have something ironic to say about what was happening. I've got to appreciate him as a person. His little daughter didn't know anything about basketball, but after she saw me in Airplane! and found out I played against her father, she asked Dan to get my autograph, so in his house, I'm a movie star. Bob Lanier, who played for Detroit, was also very funny. Bob wanted the refs to call every play his way, and he also wanted every rebound and didn't want you to run down the court too fast.

PLAYBOY: Would he actually tell you that?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Oh, he'd get mad at me for running down the court too fast. And then he'd yell at his coach, too. "Hey, I'm in here trying to rebound—what do you expect, man, everything?" I knew that Bob used to smoke cigarettes at half time, so I'd make him run a lot, and by the fourth quarter, he'd always be out of it. During games, we got to the point of blows' being thrown, but away from the court, Bob and I always got along. Lanier said he loved the Bruce Lee movie I was in, Game of Death, because I got killed.

PLAYBOY: How did you happen to be in that movie?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Bruce and I were buddies. I'd studied aikido in New York one summer while I was a student at UCLA, and when I returned to Los Angeles in the fall, the editor of Black Belt magazine introduced me to Bruce, and we began working out together.

PLAYBOY: How much progress did you make in martial arts?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I did pretty well. Bruce wanted somebody to train with who could give him some problems, and he liked sparring with me because of my height and reach—that gave me enough of an advantage to make him work a little bit. Bruce graduated me a couple of times in his own discipline, which was called jeet kune do. Basically, it was boxing and kicking, plus a few blocking techniques.

PLAYBOY: Was his death a shock to you?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It was a terrible shock. I was on my way to see Bruce when he died—a blood vessel burst in his brain. I'd been traveling around the world and was coming home from Pakistan, and I decided to stop and see Bruce in Hong Kong. So I sent him a telegram and told him I was coming in, and three days later, when I got to the airport at Singapore to fly to Hong Kong, his death was reported in all the newspapers there.

PLAYBOY: Did you continue studying martial arts after Lee died?

ABDUL-JABBAR: No, but it wasn't because of Bruce's death, which I took as a personal loss. I'd mastered what he had taught me and wasn't that keen about going any further with it. Once you mature to the point where the prospect of combat doesn't obsess you, it changes you a lot. You don't worry g"Can I kick this person's ass?" and you understand that you don't always have to be involved in life-and-death confrontations. The only thing I do now

is a form of yoga taught in Los Angeles by Bikram Choudhury, who won the world championship in weight lifting. Bikram's yoga class is designed to enhance muscle elasticity.

PLAYBOY: Let's shift gears. For the past several years, newspapers have reported widespread drug use in the N.B.A. Are such stories accurate?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I can only speak of what I've seen, which is that guys who do a lot of drugs don't last too long in the N.B.A. The physical demands made on a basketball player are so extensive that anything that detracts from your conditioning tells on you real soon. If we're talking about players who keep their heads above water and who fool around a little at an occasional party, yes, I think we've seen only the tip of the iceberg. But if we're talking about guys who get heavily into drugs, they end up having serious problems and are out of the league very quickly.

PLAYBOY: Would you level with us about your own drug use?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Well, I went to school in the Sixties and used grass when I went to movies and concerts—the usual profile. I tried LSD a couple of times in college, and that was definitely enough.

PLAYBOY: Did you have bad trips on LSD?

ABDUL-JABBAR: No, I never freaked out. I got a lot of laughter out of it—the absurdities of life are not that pronounced until you take a strong psychedelic. But your perception becomes obscured, and I didn't like that, because I wasn't in control. When I realized how easily you could lose your grip on reality, I said, g"Whoa! I've had it with this stuff."

PLAYBOY: You've admitted that you once tried snorting heroin. What were the circumstances?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I just wanted to try it—that's how bright I was. After my junior year at UCLA, I was back in New York for the summer, and I went up with some friends to Saint Nicholas Park in Harlem, which was a safe place for junkies to hang out. I had two or three snorts right around 11 o'clock at night, and after that, when the guys passed the stuff over to me, I pretended to snort more, but I'd had enough. More than enough: For two or three hours, I couldn't focus both of my eyes at the same time.

PLAYBOY: Why did you want to try heroin? Was it a macho thing to do?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yeah, I really wanted to show that I was one of the guys. Along with the other junkies, I sat in that park until four in the morning. I got home at seven and I had to go to work at 7.45.

PLAYBOY: What kind of job did you have?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I was working for the city—my job was to talk to kids about not screwing up their lives. Nice, huh? My friend Julian Dancy, a guy I grew up with and went to high school with, picked me up in his car and immediately knew what I'd been doing. I suppose it was hard for him to miss it. During the drive over to where I was speaking, all of a sudden I said, g"I have to throw up now," and I rolled down my window quick. I'll never forget the look on Julian's face. It was a combination of disgust, anger and disappointment. I knew I never wanted to see that look directed at me again.

PLAYBOY: Did a lot of your friends have problems with drugs?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yeah, and some of them are dead as a result. One guy I grew up with dealt cocaine and died of malnutrition—and when they found him, he had almost $5000 in his pocket. He was eating two or three hot dogs a day, but his main consumption was cocaine.

PLAYBOY: What about your own consumption of cocaine?

ABDUL-JABBAR: That started and really ended right before my rookie year in the N.B.A. A guy I'd known since we'd both been kids was dealing cocaine, and he had some great stuff. He said, g"Hey, Kareem, let's do some hangin' out," and I said, "Right!" So I hung out with him for the better part of a day, and I did too much. I got real wired and, later on, I went for a drive. I wanted to get on whatever expressway it was, and you know how some on ramps begin as two lanes and then merge into one? Well, another driver and I got to the of ramp at the same time, and I just decided I was going to get to the expressway first. I mean, he was not gonna beat me! So I floored it, which was not a bright move: It had been raining and the highway was slippery. My car went into a skid, jumped the curb and then did one and a half turns on wet grass. I remember thinking, I could be wrapped around a tree trunk! Why did I do this? I definitely knew that the stuff had altered my personality. At that point, I realized it was best to leave cocaine to people who really wanted to do it. There were occasions after that when I fooled around with it, but I didn't get pulled in.

> The history books I read throughout grade school and high school contained absolutely nothing about what black people did for this country... black people only get credit for urban crime and welfare fraud, with a little rhythm-and-blues thrown in.

PLAYBOY: Did you ever free-base cocaine?

ABDUL-JABBAR: No, although when that started, some people tried to get me hooked on it. That wasn't something I wanted to try even once.

PLAYBOY: The majority of N.B.A. team owners and officials would like to have players tested for drug use. What's your position on that?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I understand their sentiments—they want to do something to protect the sport and the business. There's been a public loss of confidence in the N.B.A. because drug use is so pervasive. The real problem is that they're just seeing what everyone else is seeing: Cocaine has hit the whole of American society. The military, the sports and entertainment industries, the legal and medical professions—anywhere you look, the more affluent parts of society are riddled with drug use. But because basketball players have had a lot of esteem, it's more disappointing to people. I think the N.B.A. is simply trying to do what it can to salvage the respect the public has had for its athletes.

PLAYBOY: Would you object to mandatory drug testing of N B.A. players?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yes, I would Aside from the constitutional ramifications, I think it's moving into an area where athletes would be treated like children. Basketball is not the defense industry or something that's absolutely necessary to our society. I'm not totally against mandatory testing, but I think the N B A. should find a less heavy-handed way to satisfy its need to monitor players

PLAYBOY: If you were put in charge of the problem, how would you try to eliminate drug use in the sport?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Jesus, that's tough to answer. I really think a good education program is always the way to go. Most people do not want to kill themselves or harm themselves. And if you can explain that to them in terms they can understand, usually they'll make the switch.

PLAYBOY: Having had your own fling with it, what can you tell people who want to try cocaine or are having their first experiences with it?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I can tell them that cocaine is very attractive And that it's insidious. You think you're having a nice time, and in reality, you're on the way to the gallows. As in most cases with things like this, you don't see it until it's too late. You don't realize you have a cocaine problem until the blood vessels in your nose burst, or your teeth fall out, or you're dying of malnutrition, or you've lost your job and your family That's when you find out you have a problem. Ishmael Reed wrote the most ironic—not funny, just ironic—thing I've read on this subject. Reed says cocaine is the Incas' revenge on the Europeans.

PLAYBOY: The subject of religion has come into the conversation tangentially, do you mind talking about what caused you to become a Moslem?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I don't mind at all That came about after a long search I always went to Catholic schools, because they were the best schools in New York at the time and my mother wanted me to get the best education possible. I hadn't truly been indoctrinated into the religion until I went to school, and when I learned about Jesus Christ at Power Memorial, well, it was a wonderful and illuminating encounter. But what they ended up teaching had nothing to do with the life of Jesus.

PLAYBOY: What did you think you were being taught instead?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I couldn't verbalize it at the time, but in hindsight, it was more like thought crime, and I put up with it because everybody else did. After all, this was our connection with the eternal and all that, and there were certain things you weren't supposed to think about.

PLAYBOY: Such as?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Sex But then puberty showed up, and that was it; From that point on, I knew that Catholicism wasn't for me. We were being told that it was a sin to think about sex, and meanwhile, you'd have these hormones racing through your body at five times the speed of light.

PLAYBOY: How did you deal with those attacks of wild male hormones?

ABDUL-JABBAR: At first, I tried telling myself, "Don't even think about sex," but that was impossible, it's called adolescence And, of course, I didn't know that all my friends who were supposedly getting all these women were lying to me. There I was, envying my friends and at the same time thinking, If it happens, it means I'll have to go to hell

PLAYBOY: Were you ready to sacrifice your soul?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Oh, yes, but only for Sophia Loren. She never seemed to be around, though, and I didn't lose my virginity until I was 17.

PLAYBOY: Did you feel as if you had come late to the party?

ABDUL-JABBAR: No, because everybody else was dying, too There were certain girls we'd see and we'd all go, "Ohhhh!" I had plenty of company in those days. When it finally happened, I knew it had to get better. And it did, too—as they say in Paris, "Eventuellement."

PLAYBOY: What went wrong the first time?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Nothing, except for the effect it had on my nervous system; I had the shakes for about five minutes afterward It was probably more like 30 seconds, but it sure felt like five minutes. You know, I really did have a religious conflict about premarital sex, and it wasn't until later that I found out it was a charade everybody played, but I took it seriously I was one of those kids. [Laughs] I suffered for my idealism.

PLAYBOY: Would it be fair to suggest that you were more naive than most of your classmates?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Oh, yeah. But at the same time, I was truly curious as to whether or not there really was a Supreme Being and what, if anything, made human beings unique. I wanted to get some rational, in-depth knowledge about the subject, so in my senior year in high school, I started reading just about everything I could get my hands on—Hindu texts, Upanishads, Zen, Hermann Hesse—you name it.

PLAYBOY: What most impressed you?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Hesse's Siddhartha. I was then going through the same things that Siddhartha went through in his adolescence, and I identified with his rebellion against established precepts of love and life. Siddhartha becomes an aesthetic man, a wealthy man, a sensuous man—he explores all these different worlds and doesn't find enlightenment in any of them That was the book's great message to me, so I started to try to develop my own value system as to what was good and what wasn't. And then, in my freshman year at UCLA, I read The Autobiography of Malcolm X, and that made more of an impression on me than any book I'd ever read

PLAYBOY: And that attracted you to the Islamic religion?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It was a combination of Malcolm and my Catholic upbringing, because Moslems are very affirmative about the Old Testament. It's the same basic tradition; the dispute comes as to who was going to be the final prophet that Jews, Christians and Moslems all believed was coming Basically, Jews, Christians and Moslems all believe in the God of Abraham That's a common thread

PLAYBOY: Then how do you explain the deep divisions among the three religions?

ABDUL-JABBAR: That's the baffling thing about it' None of the people who hold up these causes are acting the way Mohammed or Jesus or Moses or David taught people and showed people how to act, with the examples being their own lives. It's a strange thing to observe.

PLAYBOY: Did you consider becoming a Black Muslim?

ABDUL-JABBAR: No, but after my sophomore year at UCLA, I went up to a Black Muslim rally in Harlem, because Muhammad Ali was the speaker, and I'd always admired him. I was a college all-American by then, and when the rally was over, I was invited to have dinner with Ali at Louis Farrakhan's house in Queens We didn't really discuss religion that night, but when I started reading

about them, the Black Muslims didn't appeal to my sense of what was really true.

PLAYBOY: With what did you find fault?

ABDUL-JABBAR: The Black Muslims were xenophobic. It also seemed to me that the people at the top of the pyramid were doing great, but the people at the bottom were out selling newspapers in the freezing cold. I knew some of those guys, and they had to buy whatever they didn't sell. I didn't see any need for that. But what the Black Muslims talked about as far as black people's helping one another improve our conditions in America went made sense. That was the one thing about the Black Muslims that appealed to me, because Christian churches, for all their strength and ability to organize in the black community, have never seemed to mount anything economic or political that can protect and advance black people's interests.

PLAYBOY: What do you think of Farrakhan's views today?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I think he's misleading. I don't feel it's possible for blacks to have a separate society within America. Black society has existed in America as a different kind of mini society, but what the Black Muslims are talking about—a kind of independent nation-state—well, I just don't think it can be achieved. I would be overwhelmed with joy if black people could achieve economic and political independence and strength, and I think those are realistic goals. But they won't ever be achieved through Farrakhan's insular, separatist, hostile attitude. I believe that's going to create a polarization that'll take black people back several steps before they can walk past that point again.

PLAYBOY: Many people see Farrakhan as an anti-Semitic demagog, whipping up racial hatred. Do you agree with anything he stands for?

ABDUL-JABBAR: There are certain things I definitely agree with him on. Black people do need to be economically and politically more sophisticated and capable. That's absolutely correct, but the stuff Farrakhan tacks onto that, well, I just can't deal with it. The whole thing about white people as devils—was John Brown the Devil? A lot more like him would have really helped black people in America. I just don't agree with the Black Muslims' racist delineation of who's good and who's evil.

PLAYBOY: What induced you to become a convert to the Islamic faith?

ABDUL-JABBAR: When I started learning about it, I read the Koran and different things Moslem mystics had written, and there was this body of knowledge that perhaps wasn't black, but it wasn't European, either. I think a lot of black people are attracted to Islam in this country because the religion espouses egalitarianism, and the morality is basically the same that you find in Christianity. But the religion itself is a little more realistic. There's no hierarchy of priests that can rip you off.

PLAYBOY: That's pretty strong, why do you feel so hostile toward Catholicism?

ABDUL-JABBAR: When I was a freshman at UCLA, I did a lot of research and learned that Arab Moslems had enslaved black people in East Africa and that Christians had enslaved black people in West Africa, so no one can point a finger. But I also came across a papal bull, written in the 15th or 16th century, that basically said, "It's all right to enslave blacks and make them Christians. Let the slave trade roll." And the Catholic Church received a percentage of the profits. That was really it for me and Catholicism.

PLAYBOY: How did you feel about white people at that point?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I went through a period of angry racism and was affected by it for a little while, but then I realized that it was making me ill. My parents had always subscribed to Jet magazine, and well before I had had any personal experiences with whites, I had read about black people's being lynched. I remember when the black church in Birmingham was bombed, and that really got to me for months. When I was 15, my parents sent me down to North Carolina by bus to attend the high school graduation of a family friend's daughter. It was 1962, and I saw Jim Crow signs [whites only] all the way through Virginia and North Carolina. Black people couldn't drink at the same water fountains, use the same rest rooms or eat at the same restaurants as whites. It was hard to understand it, and the more of it I saw, the less trust I had for white people other than the ones I'd known.

PLAYBOY: The exceptions?

ABDUL-JABBAR: [*Laughs*] Right, the exceptions. I'm very thankful for those exceptions, because when I started to think logically about the subject of race again, I realized there had always been exceptions in my life, so I had to throw that theory out. I got some help with that.

PLAYBOY: From whom?

ABDUL-JABBAR: A man named Hamaas Abdul-Khaalis. My father had known him in the late Forties and early Fifties, when they were both very active as musicians. He told me that if I wanted to know more about the Moslem religion, I should talk with Hamaas, so I went to see him. Hamaas was then working for a Harlem agency that helped high school dropouts get their equivalency diplomas. He showed me that being antiwhite or anti-Semitic was ridiculous and an infection—that's the best word I can use for it. He was a sincere, down-to-earth guy, and he understood how to live as a Moslem in America and still function as an American.

PLAYBOY: Is that difficult to do?

ABDUL-JABBAR: No. The Prophet Mohammed said that the faith can't be a burden on you, so if you have to work and can't make all your prayers, that's not a big deal. There's a lot of pragmatism and flexibility in Islam, but most of the world doesn't know that, because the people who make headlines and support the Islamic cause are coming from a very radical political position.

PLAYBOY: Are you referring to Lebanon and Khomeini's Iran?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yes, and that situation really saddens me, because there's a lot of senseless slaughter going on there, and I share so much with a lot of those peoples. There's nationalism of all types, political fervor of varying degrees, and none of it is really based in logic.

PLAYBOY: What do you think should be done about the Palestinian problem?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I don't see any solution to it at all. There's just going to be more senseless death and destruction among people who really shouldn't be at odds. The most eloquent explanation of what's going on over there was given to me by a Hasidic Jew from Brooklyn. He quoted David Ben-Gurion as to how the Israeli state should evolve and said that what the Israelis are now doing is a little crazy.

PLAYBOY: In what way?

ABDUL-JABBAR: In essence, he said that Jews had had to forcefully make a place for themselves, but now, having done that, they've become too caught up in the theory that might is right. To keep a people under your heel just because it feels good or it's convenient or whatever—well, it's eventually going to work against Israel. I can see, 30 or 40 years from now, the same type of incidents that led to the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto happening

someplace in the West Bank. And for what? Those people—the Palestinians—are human. They will react to suppression the same way any people do, the same way Jews finally did.

PLAYBOY: Yet organizations such as the P.L.O. still won't recognize Israel's right to exist. What would you have Israel do?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I just think it's time for Israel to lighten up a little, but I'm saying that as someone who lives 7000 miles away from the situation, and I'm not trying to preach a sermon. I do know that the two things needed in the Middle East are tolerance and restraint on the part of all concerned, and those two things just don't exist there. And so there's going to be more tragic loss of life.

PLAYBOY: Soon after you met Hamaas Abdul-Khaalis, you bought a house in Washington, D.C., that he used as an Islamic center. In 1973, a group of Black Muslims—intent on murdering your mentor—invaded that house and killed seven people, including three of Hamaas' children and his grandchild. Why were the Black Muslims after Hamaas—and were they after you, as well?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I don't think I was in any real danger, but they wanted to kill Hamaas because he'd written letters to them and to other Moslems saying that Elijah Muhammad, the Black Muslims' leader, was a sham and a fake. I'm assuming that was an affront that couldn't be tolerated by the Black Muslims. They sent some people to kill him, but he was out of the house when they came, so they killed his family. From that point on, Hamaas just kept building a bigger and thicker wall around himself. Four years later, in 1977, Hamaas and some other people from my house in D.C. took over some buildings, held hostages, and one person died.

PLAYBOY: Why did he do it?

ABDUL-JABBAR: That was Hamaas' way of protesting the opening of a film called Mohammad, Messenger of God—it's forbidden to create any likeness of the Prophet or alter the teachings or facts of his life. I went to visit Hamaas in jail before the trial, which was the last time I saw him. It's hard to know what's going on in somebody else's mind, but it seemed he was maintaining his usual demeanor and attitude.

PLAYBOY: Do you think he would have tried that take-over if his family hadn't been murdered?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Hamaas claims that had nothing to do with it, but I don't believe that. It just seems to me that he ended up doing something really destructive—there was loss of life, and all the brothers involved in the take-over with him were separated from their families. I didn't see any logic in what he'd done, only harm. It finally made me realize you can't give your life over to anyone. It's much better to make your own decisions and live with your own mistakes than to allow someone else to make decisions for you.

PLAYBOY: Had you done that with Hamaas?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yes, I gave up way too much. I'd been seeing two women, both of whom converted to Islam because of me and studied the religion with Hamaas. When I decided to marry one of them in 1971, Hamaas strongly advised me to marry the other one instead—and I did as I was advised, even though I knew I wasn't in love with her. The wedding ceremony was held in the Washington house I'd bought for Hamaas, and it was a personal disaster; Because they weren't Moslems, my mother and father weren't permitted to attend. I knew they were outside in the hallway while the ceremony was going on, but I didn't know how to challenge Hamaas. After the wedding, I split. I went and saw my parents, and my mother was very upset, and that wound didn't heal until recently—I'm talking, like, within the past two years.

PLAYBOY: You left your wife in 1973. Was the marriage itself a disaster?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It wasn't a disaster, no. My ex-wife is a wonderful lady and a sincere Moslem, and after the divorce we still saw a lot of each other. I'm very fortunate in that we've eliminated our differences and we have a very positive relationship and beautiful children. I'm thankful for that. I couldn't ask for more.

PLAYBOY: How many children have you?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Habiba and I had three children, and I have a fourth from my relationship with Cheryl Pistono.

PLAYBOY: Cheryl Pistono has been depicted as the person most responsible for getting rid of your shyness and reluctance to deal with people. Do you think that's true?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Cheryl definitely helped, and she was the right person for that. But it was something I wanted for myself, and if I hadn't wanted it, it wouldn't have happened. We started living together in 1979, and by then I was no longer dealing with the Moslems in Washington, D.C. When I'd go out, Cheryl would go out with me, and there was a reaction in the press that was like, "He's with a woman. We can talk to this woman." And they could talk to Cheryl—she has quite a personality.

PLAYBOY: Was she a social buffer for you?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yes, she played that role. We stopped living together at the beginning of 1984, when. . . let's just say the relationship ran its course. I'd rather not talk about that in public. I don't want to minimize anything Cheryl did for me, but I remember when people started writing that Cheryl was the reason I was happy, and then other people started writing that Magic Johnson was the reason I was happy. The truth is, I was happy just because the Lakers were winning.

PLAYBOY: Before last year, your team hadn't beaten the Celtics in eight N.B.A. finals, including the 1984 championship series. Did you think the Celtics were some kind of jinx for the Lakers?

ABDUL-JABBAR: No, they're just an excellent team; but I thought we should have beaten them in 1984, and we would have if not for two critical mistakes. We lost two games to them in the '84 series because we threw the ball away at crucial times. We really beat ourselves and knew it, and we wanted another shot at them last year, because we had a lot to prove.

PLAYBOY: The Lakers and the Celtics seem to be in a league by themselves. How do the Celtics try to beat you?

ABDUL-JABBAR: The same way they beat everybody else. The Celtics play tough defense and they rebound well. They pride themselves on being a tougher team than we are, at least, they did last year.

PLAYBOY: Tougher in what sense?

ABDUL-JABBAR: That they were more physical and could outrebound us. They thought they had an advantage there, and so did a lot of sportswriters, who'd portrayed the Lakers as quiche eaters. But we knew that if we limited McHale's post-up baskets and played tough defense on Bird and didn't give him any second shots, we could beat them, and that's what happened. It's very rare for a team to win two championships in a row, and it's very important to me that we do it again this year.

PLAYBOY: If the Lakers get to the finals this season, do you think Boston will be there waiting for you again?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It wouldn't surprise me.

PLAYBOY: The Celtics have a team that's two-thirds white in a league that's 70 percent black. Does that strike you as odd?

ABDUL-JABBAR: [*Laughs*] We're not supposed to talk about these things That's a really loaded question.

PLAYBOY: It's not loaded at all, we're being straightforward here. Do you think that Boston's management has a policy of keeping the team predominantly white?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Well, some teams do seem to relish the prospect of having a star player who's white The Celtics certainly have a couple of star players who are white, and they're great basketball players. If I were a coach or a general manager, I'd want them on my team no matter what their color was. I'm not trying to put racial overtones on this, but as far as what Boston's policy really is, we'll never know

PLAYBOY: Still, basketball fans often debate whether or not the racial make-up of an N.B.A. team affects its popularity. What do you think?

ABDUL-JABBAR: If race were so important, the N.B.A. wouldn't have set new attendance records the past two seasons But there's something else to remember here: Whenever you have a winning team, people seem to forget about race very quickly. We get very tribal, but when push comes to shove and the heat gets turned on, we're all about the same basic things and our humanity overcomes all that other crap. A book I read called Bloods, about black soldiers, really brought that point home to me. A black guy who'd never really dealt with white people and resented them got put together in Vietnam with a white guy from the Deep South who considered himself Klan material. When they found themselves out there fighting Charley, they suddenly didn't care who the other guy was—they were on the same side, and screw all that other stuff. Vietnam changed everybody's thinking about who's OK and who isn't. You know how they say there are no atheists in foxholes? I don't believe there are a whole lot of racists in foxholes, either

PLAYBOY: What about in the rest of American society?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I think it's changing and for the better. For example, a teammate of mine for several years on the Lakers was a guy named Norman Nixon. Norman grew up in Macon, Georgia, and is eight or ten years younger than I am—and he attended an integrated high school and never saw a whites only sign. That, to me, is a monumental change, especially in view of what I told you about my trip down to North Carolina when I was in high school. Certain things have definitely changed for the better The racist structures that were supported by law have pretty much been struck down, and any that remain are very vulnerable to attack when spotted. As far as the battle for men's hearts and minds is concerned, that continues. But that always will continue

PLAYBOY: Are you optimistic about the eventual outcome of that battle?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yeah, I am. People are starting to understand what it means to have a free and open society that respects the rights and appreciates the contributions of all its citizens. Our democracy has never been perfect, and it was hard for Americans to admit that in respect to blacks. Maybe that was understandable, given the fact that blacks weren't brought here to become presidents of corporations. We were brought here to tote that barge and lift that bale We were brought here to be a convenience. Our men did manual labor and our women slept in their masters' beds. George Washington had something like 18 children with women who were his slaves. You know how people are always wondering, "Why are they all named Washington?" [Laughs] Well, it's legitimate. Jefferson also had a lot of black kids with his slaves We are, within our population, the children of American Presidents [*Historians have concluded that Washington had no such children*]

PLAYBOY: Did you change your name from Lew Alcindor as a stricture of your religion or was it a conscious decision to rid yourself of a slave master's name?

ABDUL-JABBAR: It was a combination of both. As far as I was concerned, I was latching on to something that was part of my heritage, because many of the slaves who were brought here were Moslems. My family was brought to America by a French planter named Alcindor, who came here from Trinidad in the 18th Century My people were Yoruba, and their culture survived slavery—there are still traces of it in New Orleans and throughout the West Indies, Cuba, Puerto Rico and French-speaking islands like Trinidad. My father found out about that when I was a kid, and it gave me all I needed to know that, hey, I was somebody, even if nobody else knew about it. When I was a kid, no one would believe anything positive that you could say about black people And that's a terrible burden on black people, because they don't have an accurate idea of their history, which has been either suppressed or distorted And I'm speaking from experience.

PLAYBOY: You weren't taught black history in school?

ABDUL-JABBAR: The history books I read throughout grade school and high school contained absolutely nothing about what black people did for this country. The only thing I learned was that black people were slaves and that Lincoln freed the slaves and then black people got dumped on during the Reconstruction. I was almost an adult before I found out that Crispus Attucks, a black, had been the first American to die in the Boston Massacre And it wasn't until I was playing in the N.B.A. that I found out that the Battle of Bunker Hill wasn't decided until Peter Salem, a black guy, shot Major John Pitcairn. Thousands of black people fought hard for America in the Revolutionary War. You know how the cavalry always shows up on time in the movies to save the settlers? Those were really black troops of the Ninth and Tenth cavalries, the buffalo soldiers They chased Geronimo, they fought Pancho Villa along the borders, and during the Spanish-American War, they fought under General John J. Pershing at San Juan Hill. When you find out things like that, your attitude changes When I understood what blacks had done here, it was like, "Hey, we've always been involved in meaningful things in America, but nobody's aware of it." Black kids need to know that; they need to know they belong here and have something to offer Right now, it seems to me that black people only get credit for urban crime and welfare fraud, with a little rhythm-and-blues thrown in I think that if our contributions to America became better known, it would give young blacks the incentive to do something. It would also give whites an appreciation of what we've contributed, and they would stop looking down on us as baggage

PLAYBOY: Why haven't the educational systems in predominantly black cities been able to do that job?

ABDUL-JABBAR: No city's educational system is capable of dealing with what black kids have to overcome in order to get an education. The black family structure is a mess, and because there's no supervision outside the school, whatever the kids are taught is rarely reinforced at home. It's a vicious cycle, with child pregnancies being one of the biggest problems Kids are great at producing babies, but when they see that raising them is an 18-year job, they say, "Screw that." So then we have more kids with no supervision, kids who end up being just like their parents. Until that can be overcome, blacks are not going to be very well educated

PLAYBOY: Have you tried to do anything about that?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yes, I worked with Arthur Ashe when he tried to start a literacy program, which consisted of having prominent blacks go around the country to promote literacy. We tried to do whatever we could to make kids deal with books and have some vision of what they'd like to do with their lives. It's proved to be more of a task than Arthur or I or anybody else could overcome.

PLAYBOY: Is it fair to say you're one of the nation's leading role models for black kids?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Yes, but for the wrong reasons. Black kids all want to go out and play basketball or football, and they should be thinking that there's an easier way to make a living. They should be thinking about going to school and having a career that lasts as long as they want it to last. They should be thinking about careers in law, in medicine, in accounting, in various technologies. Unfortunately, you have kids hoping for careers that hinge on their physical abilities, and that's not going to make it. You know how many jobs there are in pro basketball? About 275. And the average pro's career lasts about four years. It's so redundant and depressing. It's the only thing these kids talk about. It's part of the vicious cycle much of the black community has lived with.

PLAYBOY: Do you feel that that kind of thinking may be changing in the black community?

ABDUL-JABBAR: In terms of black people's moving to help themselves, it's a slow process. And understandably so, because until about 20 years ago, the political and economic development of black communities had been stymied by Jim Crow laws and de facto racism and a long history of suppressing black voting rights. It's changing, but it's like we're going from A to B, and the rest of the country has been around the alphabet twice. Blacks still don't have too much faith in the political process, and that's hurting us now.

PLAYBOY: How?

ABDUL-JABBAR: We're not using the political process as effectively as we could to improve our position. A lot of people were surprised when Harold Washington—another one of George's descendants—got elected mayor of Chicago and Wilson Goode got elected mayor of Philadelphia. It's an important new phenomenon, and an encouraging one, and we're going to have to understand what political power means on a local basis and then project it nationally. But because of all the mistrust, I don't know how quickly the black community will exploit its political power. I remember that when I was at UCLA, one of the things we used to say was that if we had James Brown and The Temptations down at the Coliseum, you couldn't keep black people out of there. But if we went down and said, "Look, we're gonna get together and organize to liberate black people," nobody would show up. That used to be a tirade we'd go on for days. But, again, black people don't trust the political process, because we've been zapped by it too many times.

PLAYBOY: Among contemporary politicians, who do you think has been most helpful to black Americans?

ABDUL-JABBAR: President Jimmy Carter, primarily because of his fantastic effort to establish Federal guidelines for hiring minorities. Unfortunately, the current Administration is trying to eliminate all that.

PLAYBOY: How do you feel about Ronald Reagan?

ABDUL-JABBAR: I see a lot of indifference there. I think his attitude is that since the Constitution is such a great document, we don't have to force anybody to do anything, because the Constitution will protect everyone. But if that were true, there would have been no need for the Voting Rights Act, because all the rights blacks were supposed to have were clearly defined in the Constitution. Yet we couldn't exercise those rights, which is why the Voting Rights Act was necessary. I just think Reagan is out of touch. He doesn't know what reality is for a black person, and maybe that explains his indifference.

PLAYBOY: You have a lot of credibility with the public, so you may very well be asked to lend your name to various politicians' campaigns. Do you plan to become more active in politics?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Well, I'd like to keep that credibility, which will make it real hard for me to get involved. But there are certain politicians I respect, such as Mayor Tom Bradley of Los Angeles and Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey. I don't know that much about Bill's politics, but I know he's honest, which is why I sent him money for his first Senatorial campaign. There are several politicians from California whom I like, and I also respect a guy from Brooklyn named Al Vann, who's done very well organizing black political groups in order to get access to the reins of political power in New York. I think that's what the black community really needs—people who can organize them and show them there's some blood to be gotten out of the turnip. It takes patience and a lot of demonstration before some people understand it, but when they do, it makes for meaningful change.

PLAYBOY: Is there a place for you in that process?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Not at present, but in the future, maybe.

PLAYBOY: When athletes retire, there's a vacuum in their lives that has to be filled. Will you miss the challenges, competition and life of a basketball player?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Sure I will. Fortunately, I still have the friends I made, so that'll take the edge off it, but the life—moving around the country like we do and knowing the people we know—yeah, I'll miss it.

PLAYBOY: In the world of sports, is it important to you how people perceive what you've accomplished?

ABDUL-JABBAR: No, because I've already gotten enough recognition to the point where I know I've impressed a few people. More than a few people. So there's no need for me to go on and on and on. I've played professional basketball longer than anyone else, and it's been great fun just fighting off the inevitable for as long as I have. I've achieved enough to back off without any regrets. I just hope that in remembering me, people will acknowledge my professionalism and consistency.

PLAYBOY: If you're able to control the next 20 years of your life the way you have the past 20 years, what would you like to accomplish?

ABDUL-JABBAR: Well, first I'd like to continue to have a positive relationship with the people who are important in my life, especially my kids. And I want to be able to maintain my business and financial entities. Beyond that, it's hard to say what I'd like to achieve. You're talking about the larger scheme of things, and that's still a big question mark. That's the adjustment I'm going to have to make—finding a direction and being able to move. Right now, I don't know where to direct my social thoughts, religious thoughts, political thoughts and thoughts about uplifting my people. I'm just one person, and at this point, all I know is that I'll play basketball for one more season, and then I'm going to rest for as long as it takes to rid my system of those 5:30-a.m. wake-up calls—the ones you get so that you can catch that next plane to that next game.

N. Sinclair Aura

Model **@miss_hollyblackwood**

Photography by **Yves Kortum | @yveskortum**
MUA **Fran Vilela | @franvilela_beauty**
Hairstyle **Anna Kompanets | @makeup_hair_kompanets**
Directors **F loudwig | @imagine_prestis_services**
Location **Chateau de Clemency**

Congratulations on your Playboy feature! How do you feel? I feel privileged. Playboy represents more than just sensuality; it's attitude, freedom of expression, and authenticity. Being here feels like being recognized as a sex symbol, something that has always carried cultural weight. And besides, it's every guy's favorite magazine... so it's kind of like stepping into a gallery of fantasies.

What is your best physical feature? My eyes and my mouth. They speak louder than words and express so much of who I am: mystery, intensity, desire.

What's something people would be surprised to learn about you? A lot of people are surprised to find out how spiritual and observant I am. I'm intense, but quiet when I want to read the room. I like to understand what drives people.

Where do you see yourself 10 years from now? I see myself living well, feeling fulfilled, and traveling the world even more than I do today. Working in one of the fields I'm already involved in, but with a deeper impact and more recognition. And if everything goes well, maybe with a family of my own, but always keeping my freedom.

Outside of modeling, what are some of your passions or current projects? I work in the beauty industry and also with immersive sensory experiences, creating unique moments for the people who come to me. I have a new project I plan to focus on starting next year. Those who follow me on social media will hear about it soon.

Who inspires you most, whether in fashion or life in general? Women who broke the rules with elegance and courage, like Sophia Loren and Monica Bellucci. I'm also inspired by women who reinvent themselves on their own. In everyday life, my mother is a big inspiration. And on a philosophical level, I'm deeply moved by thinkers like Carl Jung and Nietzsche.

What message do you hope to send to women who see your feature? Never compare yourself to others. There is room for all of us in this world, and every woman has her own beauty and her own light. Supporting one another is essential. Believe in who you are, trust your dreams and desires, you belong in the universe exactly as you are.

How do you define confidence and sensuality in your own terms? Confidence is moving through the world without apologizing for existing. Sensuality is presence, being fully in every gesture, every look, without having to force anything.

What's the biggest lesson you've learned since entering the modeling industry? Beauty opens doors, but consistency is what keeps you in the room. And knowing who you are is more valuable than trying to please everyone.

Do you like taking vacations? What's your favorite place you've been to, and where do you want to go next? I love to travel and I'm addicted to adrenaline-filled experiences, skydiving, bungee jumping, motorbikes, kitesurfing... One of the most memorable trips I've taken was through China, where I spent a month traveling by train. It was intense! (I just wouldn't recommend it for the food, sorry to fans of Asian cuisine, but I prefer European flavors lol). My next dream destinations? The Maldives and other parts of Asia.

Besides modeling, what keeps you busy? I love reading, sunbathing, riding my bike, snowboarding in the winter, trying new restaurants, visiting museums, and bookstores. I used to be a tattoo artist, so drawing is still part of me. And I really enjoy studying, I'm always learning something new to reinvent myself.

If you were stranded on a deserted island with only one accessory, what would it be? A mirror so I can see myself and never forget who I am, even if everyone else does.

What's next for you? Any goals, projects, or dreams that excite you? I'm studying music because I want to become a DJ. I love all forms of expression, and music is one of them. I want to explore it with technique, commitment, and authenticity.

What advice would you give to aspiring models? Be strategic, care for your image intelligently, and never forget who you are. Beauty is only the surface, what truly makes you unforgettable is what lies behind it.

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. Do you have any final words for our readers, and where can they find you? Thank you to everyone who values beauty in all its forms. I'm a woman in constant transformation, and if you'd like to follow my journey, you can find me on TikTok @nshb_youfavgirl

Playboy Advisor

How Do I Achieve My Dildo Dreams?

Zoë Ligon, a.k.a. Detroit's Dildo Duchess, offers her expertise on how to reinvent up our bedroom selves with sex toys

WRITTEN BY
ZOË LIGON

Q: I'm 27 years old, and I'm training my body for anal sex w th a partner. I wanted to pract ce with dildos or butt plugs first so I could move at my own speed and comfort leve without the pressure of having someone e se there. I have plenty of experience using sex toys for clitoral st mulation, but anything involving the bum is completely new terr tory for me. Do you have any t ps for beginners when it comes to sex toys and anal prepping?

It sounds like you're already in the right mind-set. When it comes to butt stuff, it's all about moving at the speed your body determines. Although this can be said for all kinds of sex, including vaginal intercourse, the anal canal is significantly more delicate. Getting familiar with your own body before playing with a partner will only help make the partnered experiences easier to navigate. Deep awareness of your physical sensations and tension is key to preventing discomfort/injury and providing pleasure. And as a bonus, paying attention to the nuance of the sensations will probably make you more aware of your bodily sensations outside of butt play!

Before you consider purchasing an anal toy, it helps to start exploring with a well-lubricated finger. Using nitrile gloves can help reduce the discomfort of any rough edges on your fingers, and it also makes cleanup a breeze. Start out exclusively stimulating the external portions of your butt – the perineum, the outer area of the sphincter, whatever feels relaxing and yummy to you. Massaging the outside of your anus will help you become acquainted with how it tenses and relaxes. The anal opening has a ring of muscle in the sphincter that you can consciously relax or contract, but there is a second ring of muscle a centimeter or two past the opening that cannot be consciously relaxed. You've got to truly let go of any inner tension cords you're unconsciously holding. In that way, anal play is a lot like meditation.

Once your butt is relaxed, it will receive whatever you gently press up against it. Gentle pressure can help guide a finger, toy or phallus past the sphincter, but you never need to force or jam something up

THE MA N DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PLUG AND A DILDO IS THAT PLUGS ARE DESIGNED TO GO IN AND STAY IN, WHEREAS A DILDO IS A MORE ACTIVE TOY.

against your butt. Approaching the sphincter at a 90-degree angle generally doesn't feel as gentle as approaching from the side and "tipping in." Another benefit of starting out with fingers is that you can feel the biofeedback of how relaxed you are. Gentle circular or side-to-side, up-and-down motions can also help massage the sphincter into relaxation once you're in up to your first knuckle. Past the sphincter, you have options! Fingering a butthole is very similar to fingering a vagina, just with a more delicate canal. You can move in and out, rock and swivel your fingers, or aim for prostate or indirect G-spot stimulation.

Once you're acquainted with fingers, this playtime will inform what type of toy you'll go for next. You can even measure the circumference of your preferred number of fingers, and compare that to the sex toy specs online to ensure you're getting an appropriate size. The main difference between a plug and a dildo is that plugs are designed to go in and stay in, whereas a dildo is a more active toy. As long as it has a flared base or definite stopping place, such as a reinforced pull-ring that won't get sucked up into your butt, it's anal safe!

Plugs are great for getting more acquainted with the sensations of fullness. The slim neck toward the base of a plug allows the anus to close around it more comfortably so you can leave it in for longer-term wear. Dildos are generally going to provide sensations similar to anal sex with a penis simply because they don't have a narrow area for your butthole to close around. There isn't a specific size or amount of time for play that you should be aiming for, that will boil down to the subtle cues your body gives you as you explore.

Besides lube, patience and awareness, placing a towel or blanket underneath you will help you mentally relax. Poop is stored in the colon and doesn't hang out in the rectum unless you're about to have a bowel movement, but, given that the butt is indeed a poop chute, shit happens from time to time. Try not to worry about that aspect of anal play so much—worst-case scenario, you can wash the towel, shower and get back to it!

Finally, it's important that whoever you are anal-prepping for is just as aware and educated on butt stuff as you are. No one wants their ass jackhammered immediately, like you see in porn. (Remember: Porn is fantasy and a performance.) Unfortunately, many givers of anal pleasure fail to pay attention to the cues of the receiver's body, and anal fissures are not something you want to experience. Lube is mandatory, and it should be reapplied as much as needed. Starting on your back can help with relaxation, but some people find that sitting down on or backing onto a toy or phallus helps give them more control of depth. It sounds like you already have the right mind-set, so just enjoy the beauty of these new sensations without any self-imposed pressure to have it go down in a certain time frame—or at all! My butt is excited for your butt!

Q: I've been dating the same man since high school. We've grown together in a lot of ways, but our bedroom routine hasn't. I regularly use vibrators and dildos during self-pleasure, and if I felt comfortable using my sex toys with my partner it could help to add some variety to our intimacy. (He doesn't know about my use of toys.) The thought of holding a vibe to my clit while he penetrates me sends me to a completely new level of arousal, but I don't know how to broach the subject with him. How do I explain this to him without him thinking I'm judging his sexual prowess?

It can be hard to break any type of routine, not just sexual routines! Sometimes the anxiety leading up to a conversation about sexual needs is far more stressful than the conversation itself. It sounds like this aspect of your solo play is something you are excited to share with him, and I would let that feeling be the leading energy in the way you approach him.

We use tools for nearly every aspect of daily life: eating, working, sleeping. We all have accoutrements that help us live our lives. Sure, we can eat all our meals with our bare hands, but forks, knives and chopsticks can help us enjoy our meals and eat more efficiently. No one has ever felt emasculated by the suggestion that they use a nail gun instead of a hammer to build a house or use a motorized lawn mower over a push mower! Vibrators and dildos are just like those types of tools—they just happen to fall into a more taboo arena.

Sex toys, like tools, aren't replacements for people. They are things people use! Vibrators can't tell you they love you or embrace you, and humans can't vibrate. Sure, humans have body parts that can penetrate and stimulate, but sometimes we get a hand cramp or we're tired or not erect. Furthermore, the vast majority of people with vulvas need external stimulation or external paired with internal stimulation to achieve orgasm. Manual stimulation doesn't do it for everyone, and vibrators help bridge the gap for a lot of people (myself included!). Although there are a lot of myths about vibrators out there, they ultimately make a lot of us very happy and help us have fulfilling sex lives.

If someone cares about us and our pleasure, they will support us doing what we need to do to experience that pleasure. I think if you share how much these toys/tools have helped you enjoy solo sex, it won't come across as anything other than a desire to experience that with him. If he has questions or doesn't know much about vibrators, education about sex toys will help him discard the myths we've all been taught from social discourse. Try not to assume that he will react a certain way or project an expected outcome onto the conversation. You might be very surprised; for all you know, he could be waiting for the right moment to suggest toys himself!

Vibrators and sex toys aside, it can be daunting to tell someone about any sex thing you've been keeping private, regardless of what it is. It always helps to be direct in your communication, and you're always welcome to say something like, "I'm nervous to discuss this thing, and I've been having a hard time bringing this up." If you know it's not any statement on his sexual prowess, then there's no need to even bring that up unless he expresses that fear. It's not your job to coddle him and reassure him, either. You don't need to make any apologies for the things you enjoy. You can point him in the direction of education and information

on the wonderful world of toys, and he may need to do a bit of research on his own.

That's okay! Any relationship will have its moments of awkwardness and discomfort. Being able to communicate and grapple with those moments only makes partnership stronger!

SEX TOYS, LIKE TOOLS, AREN'T REPLACEMENTS FOR PEOPLE. THEY ARE THINGS PEOPLE USE! VIBRATORS CAN'T TELL YOU THEY LOVE YOU OR EMBRACE YOU, AND HUMANS CAN'T VIBRATE.

Q: My question relates to cuckqueaning, so brace yourself. I am in a monogamous BDSM relationship, and I am submissive. For a while, I have fantasized about the m"cuckquean" phenomenon. Him being with other women while I'm forced to watch gets me off to the max. I have serious insecurity issues that are largely undealt with, stemming from adolescence. So it's clear to me why feeling inadequate would actually be desirable, knowing how kink can work. I desperately want to explore this kink I've been suppressing, but it's also the most terrifying thing in the world! I have already told him about it after much consternation, and he expressed interest and said we would take it slow. Do you have any advice on this tension people might have with their kink?

Absolutely! First off, congratulations for being so aware and identifying where these feelings may be coming from. You're absolutely right that kink and BDSM can have funny ways of being connected to prior experiences, especially those from youth. It sounds like you have a supportive partner and have already had preliminary conversations surrounding what you want from the experience—not just what will excite you, but also the areas in which you are apprehensive. Solid foundation!

One major aspect of cuckqueaning, cuckolding that is in opposition to monogamy is the concept of "infidelity." Googling these terms often turns up results with historical definitions that portray it as nonconsensual infidelity, with no acknowledgement of how it can be done consensually. Even if you know this is something you have enthusiastically chosen, the mainstream narrative around infidelity can creep back in and emotionally overpower you.

YOU DON'T NEED TO MAKE ANY APOLOGIES FOR THE THINGS YOU ENJOY.

It sounds like you've already identified the "what" and "why" of it all, and there are many options and exercises to consider to help you move forward. A good ol' pros-and-cons list or cost-benefit analysis will help you determine whether the tension surrounding it is worth it for you. Nerves are bound to come up, but if the stress outweighs the enjoyment for you, now may not be the right time. You can always revisit the idea.

If you choose to go for it, identifying triggers of your insecurity will help minimize the potential for it to be a negative experience. Imagine the scenario in your head, and determine which moments spark that fear. Pause when you feel uncomfortable, and identify your emotions as well as your bodily feelings. Try to think beyond the sex acts, and picture what the moments or days after may feel like. What does the worst-case scenario look like? What does the best-case scenario look like? These questions can help you have better conversations with your partner and the person you invite to join in—because they are active participants too!

We are all afraid of loss, and we all experience jealousy and insecurity. Some of that is very rational, and sometimes those feelings are our trauma-brain shouting over our logic and intuition. It's very likely that you will experience fleeting moments of insecurity even in a best-case scenario, so instead of trying to avoid those feelings altogether, you can plan ahead and create a toolkit for handling the various emotions that come up. It is no easy feat! Part of what makes kink so exciting is that we are playing with sensation and/or power exchange. There are many moving parts and variables that keep us on our toes, especially when a new person is brought into the mix. Ultimately, this is your desire, so whether you go for it or choose to keep it a fantasy, there is no rush. Meditate on it without overthinking, and communicate, communicate, communicate!

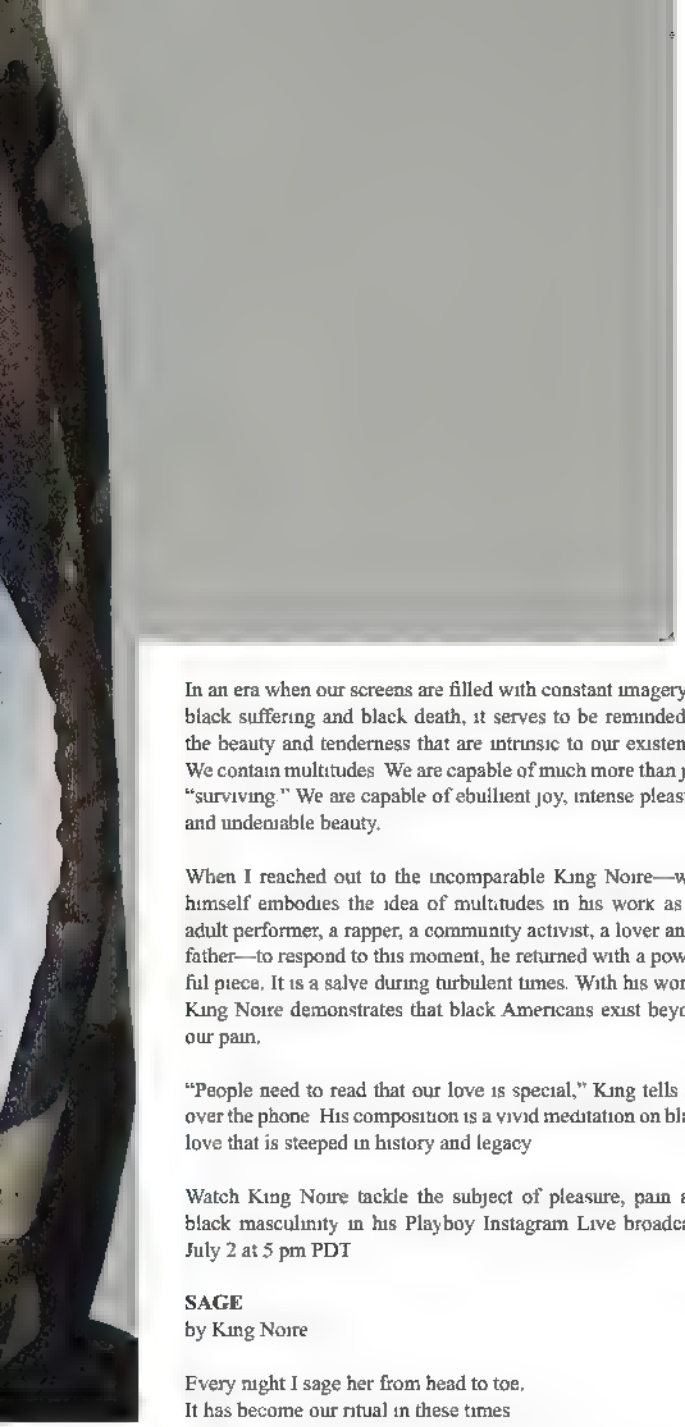
King Noire

on Pain, Pleasure and Black Love

The adult star and community activist wants people to know the Black community has more to offer than its pain.

WRITTEN BY **KING NOIRE**

INTRODUCTION BY **ANITA LITTLE**



In an era when our screens are filled with constant imagery of black suffering and black death, it serves to be reminded of the beauty and tenderness that are intrinsic to our existence. We contain multitudes. We are capable of much more than just "surviving." We are capable of ebullient joy, intense pleasure and undeniable beauty.

When I reached out to the incomparable King Noire—who himself embodies the idea of multitudes in his work as an adult performer, a rapper, a community activist, a lover and a father—to respond to this moment, he returned with a powerful piece. It is a salve during turbulent times. With his words, King Noire demonstrates that black Americans exist beyond our pain.

"People need to read that our love is special," King tells me over the phone. His composition is a vivid meditation on black love that is steeped in history and legacy.

Watch King Noire tackle the subject of pleasure, pain and black masculinity in his Playboy Instagram Live broadcast, July 2 at 5 pm PDT.

SAGE
by King Noire

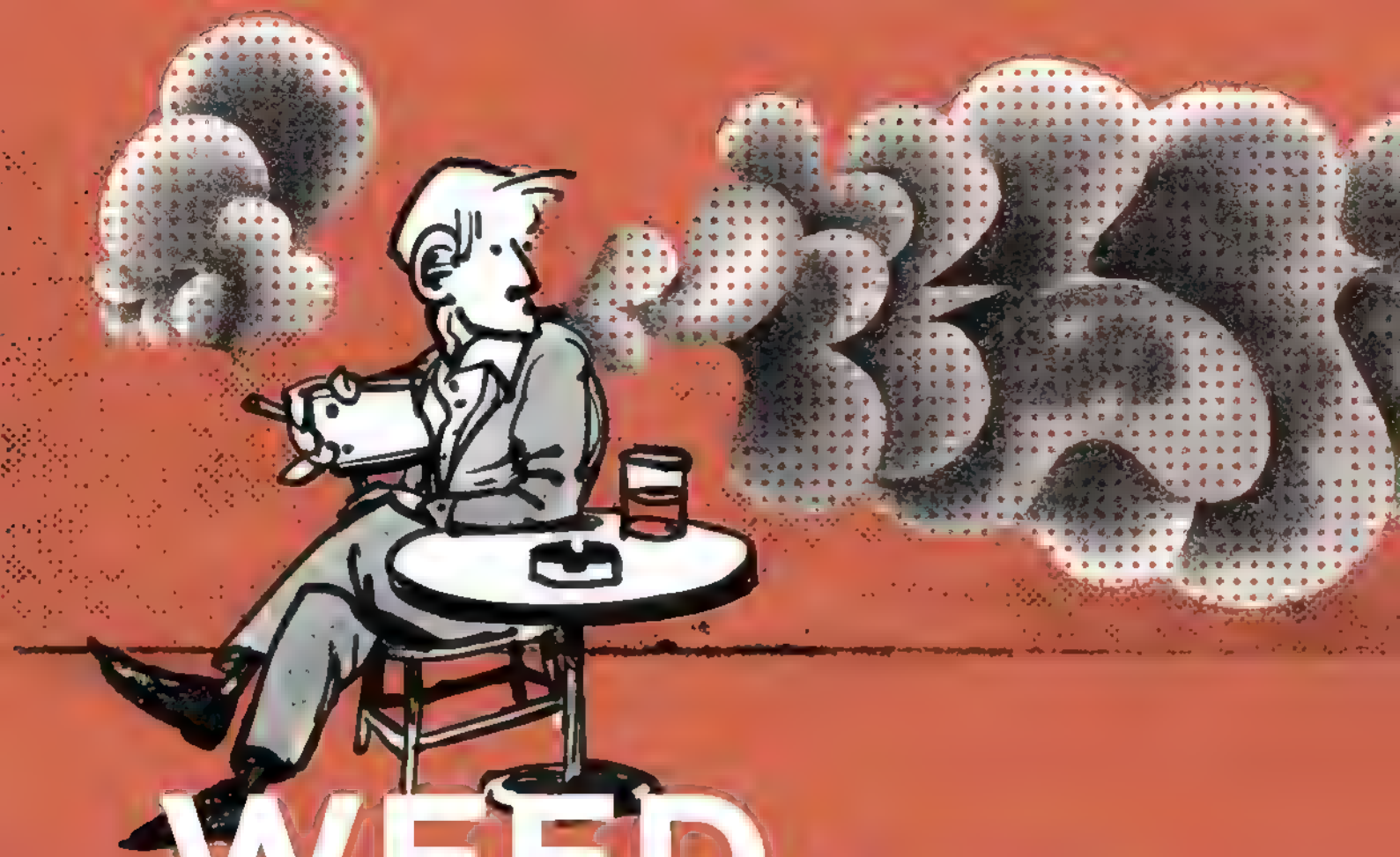
Every night I sage her from head to toe,
It has become our ritual in these times
The world around us succumbing to its sins and we stand on the front lines.
Our scars map the journey like constellations. A mutual understanding.
Hunted by police, scorned by politicians and lamented by pundits ..
Our love is treated as an enemy of the state
"Somebody kicked in the door and shot my girlfriend"
Breonna Taylor woke up to 8 shots in her bed.
Lovers left behind mourning for another chance to hold on to hope.
Ancestors jumped brooms and got married in secret without keeping master's last name,
"Until distance do you part"..
Too much adoration would get us sold away to another plantation.
Ripped away from children and kinfolk.
Forced to hide love so that they would not call the wrath of the master's jealousy.

Those bodies that he coveted as property for torture and rape had visions beyond his plantation.
That big house still stands in Suffolk haunted by its mistress's brutality.
The slave quarters with that collared green patch planted by the door and the smell of cornbread has long since been torn down.
Unmarked graves beneath the city, this country was built on our pain.
The wind blowing through tobacco, sugar and cotton fields tells love stories in a 12-bar blues.
Tied to an oak tree, side by side next to the Moore's Ford Bridge.
After 5 years serving in the Pacific theater of World War II George Dorsey came home to his wife Mae and that longing for one another lead to a passionate conception.
Sharecroppers with bigger plans, but the GI Bill was not colorblind.
Called nigger when he returned to the states in his military uniform, freedom was a foreign idea.
The Dorseys were lynched as a family
Husband, Wife and Child
One of those white men cut Mae Dorsey open to remove the unborn seed from her uterus
Those lynch mobs collected fetuses, fingers and ears
Photographed for postcards with their children posing next to corpses burned beyond recognition.
Genitalia severed and saved in jars to be lusted over as souvenirs.
Covet our bodies and fear of our soul.
Wearing crucifixes as symbols, but what side of the burning cross were your forefathers on?
Jim Crow snatched lovers from a warm embrace.
COINTELPRO made sure our intimacy was no longer private.
The war on Black America is the government's longest-running campaign
I Can't Breathe
Hands Up Don't Shoot..
Police fire 50 shots killing Sean Bell on his wedding day and changing the reason for wearing a suit.
Widowed with no wedding "Until distance do you part.. "
Our love sprints towards the drinking gourde
Inspired by revolutionary romance novels, we dream of Sundiata Acoli reuniting with Assata.
Every night I sage her from head to toe,
We honor our Orishas and every soul that has suffered just to love,
They tell us Black Love is an endangered species ..
Fuck you talking about?!
Love kept us alive,
There are those who don't want love for us, so we love harder

Fuck harder

In those moments of respite, our pain transforms into pleasure, and our fantasies of freedom become one with our moments of truth.

When in bondage all love languages translate to liberty.



WEED WARRIOR: Cannabis Knows Best

In the first installment of a series of columns on his deep relationship with cannabis, our writer shares his origin story as a pot prophet—someone who lives in service to the leafy green goodness, from smuggling to smoking to selling

BY **ANDREW DEANGELO** ILLUSTRATIONS **ROB STITES**

For the better part of four decades, my life has revolved around cannabis. I have sold, grown, smuggled, transported and hidden it. I have pushed to make it legal. I have opened a cannabis retail shop. I have become an evangelical priest and political operative for the cannabis plant.

I estimate that I have touched more than a billion dollars' worth of cannabis over my career. Thousands of pounds of weed have passed through my hands. Tens of thousands of people have enjoyed and been healed by the cannabis I've traded. I say this not to inflate my sense of value or ego, but to illustrate just how much smarter cannabis is than I am.

I first encountered cannabis in high school when I was 15 years old, and it's been a daily part of my life ever since. I'm 52 now, and I have served this plant for 37 years, helping it propagate all over the world. I've put my life and freedom at risk to spread cannabis far and wide. My entire value system is built around the lessons I learned while under the influence of the intoxicating allure of cannabis.

Engaging my endocannabinoid system daily with external cannabinoids has made me a softer and wiser person, one who understands that I'm just a small part of the web of life. And I have come to revere the life force that makes the sun burn and our hearts beat—the life force that embodies both the cannabis plant and the sentient being known as myself. We've been together a long time now. You might say we are the best of friends.

I knew it would be this way during that first smoke way back in 1984. A serious sports injury had just crushed my dreams of becoming a professional athlete, and I sat, depressed, in my mom's kitchen. My older brother handed me a joint. "It'll make you feel better," he said. I had resisted similar overtures in the past, but a little voice deep inside told me to hit that joint. And when the joint hit me back, the transformative effects that cannabis has on many people happened to me instantaneously. My sadness lifted, and I began to see that there was more to life than playing sports. Suddenly I had a new ally—this plant that I could turn to for strength, wisdom and inspiration.

This realization was incredibly liberating for me as a young man trying to find his place in the world. I knew I had to keep being with this plant and had to help others do the same. And at the age of 15, that's about all I knew—that and the fact that change is the only constant. I was just learning how to be in the world, but somehow I knew that I had to sell weed. What happened to me needed to happen to everybody. The plant was so wise. If I could just get it into the hands of more people, the rest of the work would be done by Mama Ganja. The world would become a more compassionate place by default.

What I didn't know was just how hard it would be to break cannabis prohibition and erase the stigma that goes with it. I had figured it would be easy because even at 15 years old, I saw the absurdity of cannabis prohibition. But I had no way of knowing or understanding the kind of sacrifice needed to do something as monumental as getting the U.S. to legalize weed. I didn't know my quest would cost me relationships I cared about but could not sustain as I worked underground, as well as careers and other aspirations that were closed to me, out of reach due to my cannabis advocacy during a time when the war on drugs was all the rage. I didn't know that I would be busted and locked up, which happened to many family members and friends of mine [illegible]

Cannabis is in the driver's seat: We are merely passengers on a journey to somewhere better.

Those things caused me a lot of personal pain by subjecting me to rejection and ostracization for no good reason. I was in a constant state of doubt about my life and choices. And through it all, cannabis provided comfort, relief and reassurance that I was on the right path even if it was very dark, sometimes, with no end in sight. The cannabis community that I helped foster underground, and later above ground, has always been the source of healing and opportunity for me. All these brothers and sisters have been touched by cannabis the same way I've been. Together, we all have a similar understanding that cannabis is in the driver's seat: We are merely passengers on a journey to somewhere better.

Our role is to end cannabis prohibition, free the plant and create a global hemp economy. The plant will take it from there because the plant got us this far. Cannabis will soon be cultivated everywhere on earth. It is a plant that has bloomed inside human physiology and integrated itself in our DNA, a plant that can be food, fiber, fuel and medicine; a plant that has captured the imagination of science, art, music and pop culture. It is a plant that has a wisdom far beyond our own.

I am grateful to be in service of cannabis because cannabis is smarter than I am. Mama Ganja knows where she's going. I just have to help her get there.

LIFE IS SHORT, ENJOY IT

Kiki Daniels

Model **@funwithkikix**
Photographer **@Mike Cohen | @mikecohenphotos**
MUA **Dayna Mansfield | @dcmua_**

Congratulations on your Playboy feature! How do you feel? Amazing! It's always a real privilege to be featured in Playboy! And it's something I could only have dreamed of when I first started my career.

What is your best physical feature? I'm often told it's my eyes; I have a very distinctive icy blue eye colour, and it gains a lot of attention.

What's one thing people would be surprised to learn about you? I'm a huge nerd, I love anime, and in my free time, I bury my head in a book. I'm not into partying or social events ... I'd much rather be at home in my comfy clothes.

Where do you see yourself 10 years from now? I'd like to be settled with a big family somewhere in the countryside.

Outside of modeling, what are some of your current passions or projects you're working on? I'm really into fashion and interior design, so I spend a lot of my free time renovating my home and wardrobe! I'm also a big travel bug, so I travel with my family a lot.

Who inspires you the most, either in modeling or in life in general? My fiancé manages it all so well: our family, his career, my career, me, our home. He never leaves a task undone, and I admire that about him so much.

What message do you want to send to women who see your feature? It's so important to live your life the way you choose to, even if it goes against the grain of what the rest of the world considers " normal" life. Life is short, enjoy it.

How do you define confidence and sensuality in your own terms? If you feel sexy, you are sexy. And that's really all there is to it.

What has been the biggest lesson you've learnt since joining the modeling industry? It's not a forever career, so I've been sure to enjoy every moment of it and say yes to every opportunity when it's been suitable for me

Do you like taking vacations? What is your favourite place you have been to, and where would you like to visit next? Yes, I love travelling! I'm always travelling with my family, my favourite place would be Costa Rica or the Maldives, they are so beautiful. Hawaii is on my bucket list.

Besides modeling, what keeps you busy? My family, I'm a homebody, I love being with my family more than anything.

If you were stranded on a desert island with only one accessory, what would it be? A blanket! I don't like being cold... EVER

What's next for you? Any goals, projects, or dreams you're excited about? I'm planning to extend my family, and that's a super exciting time.

What advice would you give to aspiring models? Jump right in! You can only fail if you don't try! Who knows what could happen

Thanks for taking the time to speak to us. Do you have any last works for our readers, and where can they find you? If you'd like to see more of me and my homemade images and videos, you can find me on Onlyfans @funwithkiki www.onlyfans.com/funwithkiki

Playboy Interview
ELTON JOHN

A candid conversation with the unlikeliest, flashiest pop star of them all

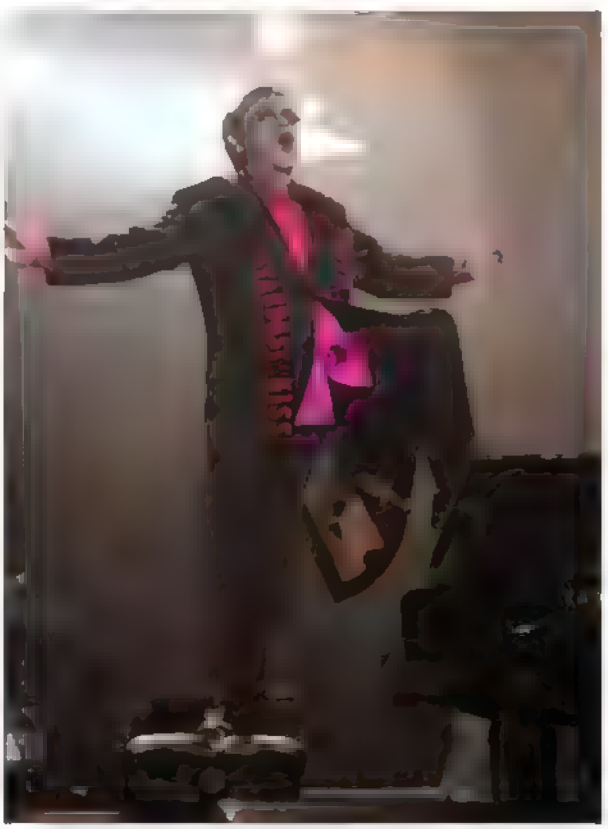
INTERVIEW BY **EUGENIE ROSS-LEMING, DAVID STANDISH** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **TERRY O'NEILL**

Five years ago, Elton John was just another schlub like the rest of us. He was broke half the time, he was shorter even than Robert Redford, his hair was already beginning to thin, he was usually more plump than he liked and he wore glasses as thick as Coke-bottle bottoms. Hardly what you'd call a head start in the Rock Star Derby; he would have stumped any To Tell the Truth panel asked to make the real next Mick Jagger please stand up.

Last year he made $7,000,000—and did the impossible: released an album, Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy, that entered the charts at number one and shipped platinum—music-biz jargon for $1,000,000 worth of sales—overnight. Nobody had ever done both before—not the Beatles, the Stones, Sinatra, John Denver. Then, a couple of months ago, he promptly topped himself with Rock of the Westies, which shipped $1,400,000 and again entered the charts at number one.

Elton has become the biggest thing ever to hit the music business, partly because he seems to appeal to—or at least not alienate—all sorts of different people. Teeny-boppers adore him; people who would be moved to murder by Led Zeppelin don't go for their shotguns when they hear him, and

even Rolling Stone sometimes likes what he does—according to its lights, anyway. That's why his string of singles lighting up the charts stretched uninterrupted for nearly four years, broken only briefly last fall, a record topped only by—can you guess?—Pat Boone. Converting that into plastic, it means nearly 35,000,000 singles have sold world-wide, and his 13 albums are somewhere in the 40,000,000 range, which makes it easy to understand the vinyl shortage. All that vinyl in turn converts, along with touring and little asides like being the platformed Pinball Wizard in the film version of Tommy, into $7,000,000 annually, which in turn converts into a $1,000,000 house in Beverly Hills, another outside London, 200 pairs of shoes, eyeglasses of every shade and outrageous configuration, his own record company, a budding art collection of elegant ceramic deco ladies, more singles and albums than he can count, jukeboxes, pinball machines—whatever gleams next in his eye.



But in August of 1970 he was another unknown here. That changed in a week. On his first trip to America, he played the Troubadour in Los Angeles to audiences consisting mostly of the rock press and assorted music-biz types—a group of people who generally strive mightily to be as jaded and blase as they are sun-tanned and lean. This time they all went berserk. In a famous review that launched Rocket Man into the skies, Robert Hilburn of the Los Angeles Times began: m"Re¸oice. Rock music, which has been going through a rather uneventful period lately, has a new star. He's Elton John, a 23-year-old Englishman whose United States debut, was, in almost every way, magnificent." Back here in colder regions, we thought at first that all of them had been out in the sun too long. His first American album, Elton John, was all gloomy and doomy, with a brooding, poetic portrait of him on the front and strings to boot—not bad, but not our idea of rock m'n' roll. What were those people hollering?

We found out when first we saw him live, Mr. Hyde incarnate, pounding the piano like Little Richard possessed, jumping around on top of it wearing a sequined something or other and a feather boa and flashing neon sunglasses and God knows what else, manic and sweating, forcing the energy to levels higher and higher and, yes, that was rock p'n' roll.

In the years since, we have watched him become, in the astronomy of the hype wizards, a megastar (better and more durable than a nova or a supernova, with their depressing implications of grandly dying light). And as that's happened, we've all heard more and more about his life out of the studio and offstage, when the Alice in Wonderland costumes are back in the closet.

His passion for tennis, and Billie Jean King as a partner; his long-distance collaboration with lyricist Bernie Taupin, who's written almost every word that Elton's made famous, popping up onstage to jam with the Rolling Stones; stark tabloid pictures of him decked out in spangles and fur at some fancy L.A. bash, his arm around Bob Dylan or Cher.

It seemed a good time to get his version of it all, find out how it all looked from the roller coaster. So we sent freelancer Eugenie Ross-Leming and Staff Writer David Standish (the same team that got Cher to say all those surprising things in last October's interview) to talk with him in his newly bought mansion up in the canyon hills. As Eugenie told us about it,

"Nine a.m. is too early to talk to anyone other than the milkman, let alone an anointed megastar, but with our rented Dodge overheating and our own heads in that peculiar brain-baked state that hits you in Southern California, we headed east on Sunset toward Elton's Benedict Canyon home. We followed PR man Dick Grant's secret and thorough instructions and continued our cruise up streets lined with palm trees sprouting along the curbs like hormone-infused pineapples. The canyon road steepened and close to the top, right below Alice Cooper's place—which had mysteriously burned down the previous night—was Elton's house. It's Moorish, with a high wall in front and an arched walkway, a fountain and lush greenery—sort of an Alhambra a go-go.

"We talked with him by the pool, under a Bedouin-style enclosure. Coffee and cookies kept us going, although Elton had already played several sets of tennis before our arrival. We talked about superstardom, sex, drugs, politics, music, and just why he is where he is—living the laid-back life in a house smelling of bougainvillaea and Twenties decadence, with the ghost of Garbo listening in his gazebo—and, of course, where he's going from here. We started by asking him, well, why him?"

PLAYBOY: You were recently voted Rock Personality of the Year. Why do you think people are so fascinated by you?

JOHN: Most people are nosy.

PLAYBOY: Any other reasons occur to you?

JOHN: Well, most people think I've got so much money, more than I really have. Hell, Paul Simon has more money than me. He's into his own publishing. But people are fascinated by anyone who's got money.

PLAYBOY: Some press reports estimate that you make $7,000,000 a year, which is a healthy allowance.

JOHN: I wouldn't say that. I probably flaunt it more than anyone else. I spend lots on myself. That's probably why I got that Rock Personality thing, g'cause I'm the only one who spends money. You forget about the quiet rich—at least you can gossip about me. I dress for it.

PLAYBOY: Yes, you do. Would flamboyant be too strong a word?

JOHN: Oh, I just like to get up and have a lark. I do it tongue in cheek with an g"up yours" attitude. I love people who expect me to wear great, feathery costumes—and I do it. It's like an actor getting into his costume for his part. I don't really feel the part until I'm into whatever I'm going to wear.

I'm pretty well making up for lost time. Not having had a real teenage life, I'm living those 13-to-19 years now. Mentally I may be 28, but somewhere half of me is still 13. That may be why I dress like a kid onstage. I know I look ridiculous sometimes, absolutely idiotic, but remember, when I started, I was quite rotund. I mean, I'm not exactly your normal teenage idol.

PLAYBOY: What makes you say that?

JOHN: For one thing, I'm quite aware that my hair's falling out—which is a real drag, because it didn't happen to the rest of my family. It must be because I was a silly cunt and dyed my hair a lot. So, since I've just discovered I don't want to be bald, I might have a hair transplant. It's just a matter of going down there with the courage to say, g"I want some more hair, please."

PLAYBOY: The rock press ought to have quite a time with that bit of news. Given your enormous publicity, what's the worst thing you've read about yourself?

JOHN: Well, let's clear up that incident with the Rolling Stones.

PLAYBOY: You mean the one reported in Rolling Stone magazine—that you barged on stage during the Stones tour and they weren't exactly happy about it?

JOHN: Yes. Here's what happened: Mick Jagger asked me to sit in on g"Honky Tonk Woman." I did and then left the stage to watch the show. Later, this roadie gets me and says Billy Preston wants me to join them. So I did. Then I read in Rolling Stone how Keith Richards was pissed that I wouldn't split the stage. I'm fed up with those damn fucking lies. They don't get their fucking facts right. Rolling Stone is becoming the National Enquirer of rock m'n' roll, and they have no sense of humor whatever.

Now, Creem magazine I adore. They have a sense of humor. They run some very good pieces, and often you'll read something about yourself that's entirely insulting but very funny. In their poll this year, I figured in every section. Asshole of the Year, Hero of the Year, Rip-off of the Year.... I really liked that, because it was funny.

PLAYBOY: What are some of the more bizarre rumors about you?

JOHN: There's one guy who writes for the Daily Express; he's got a gossip column. He's printed a couple of things about me—they've not been nasty or anything, they've just been absolute rubbish. When Evel Knievel was supposed to jump that canyon in the rocket, I was supposedly by his side, singing the national anthem. There I was, sitting in my house, going, Oh, yeah? And silly stuff like having my head superimposed on someone else's body or headlines like m"Elton Loves Ann-Margret" or "Elton Elopes with Cher." Well, Cher's eloped with everyone. The National Star wrote that I'd become an egomaniac when I broke up the band and said I believed after my role in Tommy that I was the world's biggest film star. At that time, I was hiding behind the walls of my Hollywood mansion. Not even my servants knew where I was.

PLAYBOY: Does that stuff piss you off?

JOHN: The things that upset me are the lies. I get very mad at people saying I'm a four-chord musician, with only a four-chord style. I was trying to think of one song I'd written with only four chords in it but couldn't come up with one. That upsets me. I hate trash magazines. People believe them, that's the thing about it.... When I read something in the National Star which is absolute rubbish, I say, m"Well, how dare they print that?" But then I'll go on to the next page and read something about someone else and I'll go, Hmmm...did they really do that? I mean, I'm the first person to get sucked in. But some of them are really sickening. People behind gossip magazines should be run off the street, tied up in stocks, and everyone should throw bad cabbages at them. I'll lead the way!

"I refuse to become a recluse. And there are inconveniences to stardom, but you just put up with them."

PLAYBOY: Do the rumors and publicity make you want to hide, get away?

JOHN: I refuse to become a recluse. And there are inconveniences to stardom, but you just put up with them. If I get stopped for autographs 1,700 times a day, then I get stopped. I'm certainly not gonna shut myself away; I still go out and buy my own groceries. But crazy things can happen. One day recently, I woke up and there was this chick sitting on the bed right next to me. I'm a bit blind without my glasses. I said, m"Who are you?" And she said, "Oh, you don't know me." She'd gotten in without a key. Christ, it could have been someone with a fucking gun.

PLAYBOY: How did she get your address?

JOHN: The CIA should have the sources these kids have. We never told anyone where I live. Eight people have the phone number, and still it's gotta be changed every two weeks.

Another weird thing is the fans' morbid curiosity. Like, the other night Alice Cooper's house burned down. And people are driving up with their girlfriends and asking, p"Can we park?" I mean, it's fucking sick. People just want to see what's going down. They probably don't believe you go to the toilet.

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